

Driven: Children's need inspires retirees to make toy cars

Fort Meyers • Southwest Florida

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Jun. 9, 2013 8:24 PM



Peter Mattimore of Bentley Village in Naples, right, shows Craig Schneider of Suncoast Contractors Supply and a volunteer with Builders Without Borders, left, one of the wooden cars made by craftsmen from Shell Point and Bentley Village on Friday at the Shell Point retirement community. / Amanda Inscore/news-press.com

A new, not-quite-cottage industry is growing in Southwest Florida, where hundreds of handcrafted new cars have rolled off the assembly lines of two small-scale Southwest Florida factories in the last year.

The operation has maintained a low profile, partly because most of its product is destined for export and partly because the captains of this new industry are pretty modest guys who just want to do a little good in the world.



That's also why they don't sell the cars they build (which happen to be made of wood and just a few inches long) — they give them to children in the world's neediest places.

"Many of these kids have never owned anything and to just have a toy that's theirs is really something," says volunteer builder Ken Treiber, who lives at Shell Point Retirement Community in south Fort Myers, where he and three other woodworking residents have been crafting the little cars.

So far, they've made and sent more than 300 cars around the world. Destinations have included Afghanistan, Nicaragua, a children's hospital in Mali and Toys for Tots nationally and Operation Christmas Child internationally.

Last week, the automakers hosted a similar group from Collier County's Bentley Village for lunch, a tour of Shell Point's well-appointed workshop and a meeting with Builders Without Borders volunteer Craig Schneider.

But it was more than a social call: the business at hand was an upcoming trip to Africa that Schneider is making with the nonprofit, which does construction projects for missionaries in developing countries.

Schneider, who works for Suncoast Contractors Supply, is donating lumber to the woodworkers; the woodworkers, in turn, are donating another fleet of cars destined for Rwanda's Kigali Christian School. Later this month, when Schneider and Builders Without Borders travel to the central African nation, a container of 400 little cars made by Shell Point and Bentley Village residents will go too.

"My wife, Lynn, works at Shell Point (as assistant vice president of marketing and communications) and she put the pieces together," Schneider says. "She knew the cars were piling up, and we have this trip coming up in June," he says. "We're all pretty excited about this."

It all started when Treiber's neighbor, Bill Reiff, learned of a Denver-based nonprofit called Toys for God's Kids, which sends handmade toy cars around the world, a few years ago.

"When I moved to Shell Point, I needed something to do and was kind of tired of playing golf," Reiff says. "Then I found out this group has sent out 500,000 cars since about 2003, and I thought, this is a good idea."

Each little chassis is made from poplar, thanks to Naples Shutter, which gives the men scraps left over from its window blinds, Treiber says. They make the wheels of longer-lasting hardwood, which is harder to find but longer-lasting, he says. "The idea is that hopefully, they will last a little longer on the rough terrain."

For their part, Treiber and Reiff are delighted with the partnership and would like to expand further. "We're always looking for ways to spread the word and spread the toys," Treiber says.

The men say they'd be happy to talk to mission groups, nonprofits and others who know of kids who'd like their cars.

"We'd like to get a full-time marketer who'll run around the world finding places for us to give them to," Treiber says, only half-jokingly.

Learn more

- Contact the Shell Point automakers: Bill Reiff, 437-0483, or Ken Trieber, 267-7229.

Online

- toysforgodskids.com
- builderswithoutborders.net

Besides, says Reiff, “When you get old and lazy, you think ‘There must be some reason I’m healthy — before I kick the bucket, maybe I could contribute a little to mankind.’”