

Hammering for children

Retirees working for Toys for God's Kids have made 405,000 wooden cars

By Joey Bunch *The Denver Post*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2012

Dutch Van Maaren calls his passion of woodworking "an addiction."

And he uses that passion as a means of selfless giving.

The 72-year-old craftsman and Gates Rubber Co. retiree, along with about two dozen volunteers at two Centennial retirement communities, makes toys for children and keeps the spirit of Christmas alive in their hearts all year long.

In a third-floor workshop at the Johnson Center and Village assisted-living facility in Centennial, three women and 10 men spoke little but smiled a lot as they recently worked on an assembly line of wooden toy cars, tapping pegs and making wheels spin like overgrown, gray-haired elves in Santa's workshop.

"Woodworking is an addiction, and I enjoy it,"

Van Maaren said. "And it's also enjoyable to see the pictures of the little kids who receive the toys. Sometimes it might be their only possession, the only toy they've ever had.

"It's a good thing to be able to give a child something like that."

Marlin Dorhout, another Gates Rubber Co. retiree, started the Denver-based nonprofit Toys for God's Kids after a visit to Nicaragua in 2000 with Habitat for Humanity. Demand for his woodwork soon outpaced what he and his immediate friends could do on their own.

Volunteers at the Johnson Center and Village and their counterparts down the street at Holly Creek Retirement Community took up the saws and mallets. Toys for God's Kids has churned out more than 405,000 cars.

Herb Bowman, 84, a toymaker and resident at Holly Creek, said the simple wooden cars are like the ones he played with as a child.

"I look at the toy and think some child somewhere in world is going to play with this just like the way I played with toys when I was a kid," he said. "The term is overused, but the warm fuzzies, that's what it gives me, and it's a good feeling."

Any church or other organization that helps children can ask for an order and pay nothing in return.

The year-round, Santalike project operates with virtually no budget.

People donate scraps of good wood, and Van Maaren makes sure practically every inch gets used. At the point where one toy ends in a cut of wood, another one usually begins.



Ernie Friesen, 86, left, and Henry Wood, 86 — part of a group known as the "Smilemakers" or "Santa's elves" — work on wooden toy cars at the Christian Living Community's Village retirement home in Centennial on Wednesday. (Photos by Cyrus McCrimmon, *The Denver Post*)

Van Maaren's personal woodworking tools populate the basement woodworking shop at the Village.

Bowman described how existing volunteers approach new retirement- home residents in the cafeteria, to assess their skills and interests, before adding them to the crew.

Linda Haeck, the life-enrichment director for Christian Living Communities, which operates Holly Creek and the Village, said cutting wood, tapping on wheels and filling orders is a gift to children that gives back tremendously to dozens of volunteers in their latter years.

"They see a purpose, that life doesn't stop when you move into a retirement center," she said. "It's about giving and not expecting anything back in return. It's about saying, 'This is what I have to offer.' "

Joey Bunch: 303-954-1174,
jbunch@denverpost.com or twitter.com/joeybunch



A collection of toy wooden cars made by the seniors at the Christian Living Community's The Village retirement home in Centennial on Wednesday, November 14, 2012. The toy cars are presents to children around the world in the Toys For God's Kids program. Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post (THE DENVER POST | Cyrus McCrimmon)