

## Making Smiles One Toy at a Time

*The five-year old boy tried to listen as his parents talk with his doctor in the hallway of a Tampa Bay pediatric hospital. His condition would require difficult procedures over a long period of time, he overheard. The child's head dropped, and he was near tears. Bob Helms, president of the nonprofit Toymakers of East Lake, just happened to be in the same hallway with several student volunteers, delivering ToyMakers' quarterly allotment of colorful, handmade toys for hospital patients. A high*



*This little girl had just come out of surgery at Tampa General. Her face broadcast her pain and fear, but she broke out in a big smile when she was offered a toy.*

*school volunteer dropped down in front of the boy's wheelchair and gently asked him if he would like a toy. The child picked out a bright red car, gave a tentative smile and whispered, "Thank you." Later, as the volunteers were about to leave, they happened to catch sight of the same boy coming out of a procedure room. From 50 feet away, the child recognized the ToyMakers, smiled broadly this time, and yelled out, "Thank you, thank you," over and over.*

Experiences like this are what bring Helms and 300 other volunteers – including middle and high school students from six local schools and many senior citizens – to a low green building tucked amid trees behind East Lake Methodist Church, ToyMakers of East Lake's workshop. The oldest volunteer is 99, and there are four World War II veterans. They are there as often as four mornings a week, each working on one particular step in the production process for which he or she has been trained. They cut out dozens of kinds of toys from planks of

hardwood, using templates; they plane, paint them and carefully affix wheels made from a specially selected hardwood, then wrap them in plastic, ready for their new owners. ToyMakers also repairs and gives away bicycles to children, veterans, and working adults.

An astounding number of toys are produced each year—18,000—and given to children who are seriously ill or in other stressful situations such as abuse, homeless shelters, new separations from parents, placement with foster families, and children undergoing chemo or rehabilitation. ToyMakers works with major private and public agencies to identify the children, and often the staff of those agencies are the ones who give the toys to children. But Helms makes a point of delivering some of the toys in person, taking with him other volunteers, including teenagers.



The most popular toy is the helicopter, followed by the Batmobile (ToyMakers must pay for the licensed stickers), Bat-helicopters, Superman and Spiderman cars, Disney princess cars, various animals such as

bumblebees, horses, snails, turtles, even Great White sharks. Barbie cars, police cars, ambulances, and a ladybug with a painted face are also popular. Some of the designs have been suggested and produced by volunteers. The Great White was suggested by Helms' young grandson, who also critiqued Helms' original design.



*Bob Helms talks to an 11-year-old who had been brought to the hospital by helicopter.*

In most cases the child is given one toy. However, if the child has been removed from his/her parents in a police car at the direction of Family Services, the child will be given a toy police car while in the real police car and can choose another toy later. Similarly, children transported to hospitals in ambulances or helicopters will be given a toy ambulance or helicopter during the trip and can choose another toy in the hospital.

Questioned about the high number of children receiving the toys each year, Helms agrees that it is hard, and sad, to picture 18,000 children, infants to age 12, in Tampa Bay dealing with so much pain, sadness and fear – but the organizations with which ToyMakers partners have no trouble finding that number of children who could be comforted by the toys, and the ToyMakers volunteers hope to keep increasing their capacity. “There really are that many sick and needy kids in our area,” states Helms.

### **A Model of “Productivity Optimization”**

The workshop is a model of efficiency and productivity, due in large part to the expertise in logistics, business management and satellite communications that Helms brought to ToyMakers when he first became a volunteer in 2009. A long-time woodworker, also a CEO and entrepreneur, Helms has been a board member since 2010 and president since 2011.

Although he is at the workshop nearly every one of the four mornings a week that the workshop is open, he is quick to point out that he really doesn't manage the volunteers. He has developed a “project worksheet” with 36 steps, from starting a new worksheet for one type of toy and selecting a piece of wood that best fits that toy, to bagging the toy and placing it in the inventory room. Toys in various stages of production are placed in low-sided boxes and labeled with the next step to be done. “A volunteer comes in, selects a box and knows exactly what to do. No one needs to ask or be told what to do.”



*A stand for wheels about to be painted, one of Helms' inventions.*

But that is only one aspect of the “process optimization” that Helms has brought to ToyMakers. He has designed and made a stand that allows volunteers to paint 400 to 500 wheels at a time. With a total of 13 paint stands, volunteers can paint about four to five thousand in a single four-hour shift. He has also designed a stand for painting the bodies of the toys: one coat of primer and two coats of high gloss acrylic latex, donated by Sherwin Williams. He also adapted a drill press to make precise axle holes for the wheels, a requirement if the wheels are to stay on. “We don’t want a child just out of surgery to receive a toy, only to have the wheels fall off,” says Helms. “They are already upset.”



There is an emphasis on safety, too, safety for the volunteers and for the children who receive the toys. Student volunteers cannot use power tools until they are 18 years old and only then with exacting training. Some volunteers, including women, come to ToyMakers with no experience operating power tools. Yet more than a few are now using drill presses, sanders, joiners and other tools. The precise process that they follow, starting with wheels and axles of a special type of low-moisture maple, also ensures that the wheels on the toys do not come off.

#### **Leadership Experience for Teenagers**

Helms is also proud that ToyMakers has two students on the eleven-member board, that each board member (including the teenagers) has a specific role to fill, and that ToyMakers has become an organization that nurtures responsibility and leadership in young people. One student board member became chair of the grants committee. She taught herself how grant proposals are written and raised \$21,500. “That was a great learning experience for her, and evidence of remarkable initiative,” recalls Helms. He writes college entrance recommendations for many of his student volunteers and stays in touch with them for years.

#### **Seniors Making a Difference**

Even more, ToyMakers gives purpose to many seniors who have limited physical capacities. “We find something for every single volunteer to do,” says Helms. It might be bagging toys or helping with administrative work. Every job is important, and even octogenarians and nonagenarians know they are making a difference for kids.

Theresa Burke, a resident of Geoffrey Court and now a ToyMakers board member, says that she is involved with ToyMakers of East Lake “because I love it.” One of the younger retirees, a former employee of the Post Office, she arranges deliveries with agencies and volunteers. She also works in inventory, is a planer, and does “whatever is needed.” The week



before Thanksgiving, a table in her lanai was piled with toys that had needed a touch up of paint. They will be soon part of a quarterly delivery of 5,000 toys. "You get a nice feeling when you know that each of these toys will go to a child who really needs it."

### Inspiring Other ToyMakers

The original ToyMakers was in New Port Richey, founded in the early 80s by a grandfather who visited his grandson in the hospital, only to find out that the hospital had no toys for its young patients. He returned to his woodworking shop and made some wooden toys for his grandson to play with during and after the hospital stay. A few days later a nurse asked him if he could make more. ToyMakers was born.



News of the smiles that the toys brought to kids' faces soon spread. In 2007 a few members of the East Lake United Methodist Church learned that the church owned a building behind the church that was not being used. That was the beginning of ToyMakers of East Lake. Since then the East Lake organization has assisted in starting two more ToyMakers in Illinois, one in Hugo, Oklahoma, and one in Yulee, Florida, near Jacksonville.

And who knows how many other ToyMakers of East Lake has inspired? ToyMakers of East Lake has been featured on all the local TV stations, in print articles, and even on Fox News in NYC.

Flown to NYC by Fox News, Helms brought a volunteer in his 90s, Thad Pollard, who had been a Seabee in World War II, repairing ships. Thad was a long-time fan of Elizabeth Hasselbeck. Helms asked the producers if they would set up the interview with Hasselbeck and she complied, to Pollard's ever-lasting wonder.

*Theresa Burke of Geoffrey Court*

brought a volunteer in his Seabee in World War II,

### The Economics of Toy Making

ToyMakers works with a modest budget, thanks to the generosity of individuals, corporations and foundations. Many of the power tools have been donated by corporations and foundations. There have also been some "near miracle" donations that Helms had a key role in securing. Take the two shipping containers behind ToyMakers' workshop, used to store planks of wood and bicycles needing repairs. Helms had hoped to secure a 20-foot container from a shipping company for wood storage. Using his connections to CEOs in Tampa and in the transportation industry, ToyMakers was given not one, but two containers made of tungsten steel, each 53 feet long, free of charge. They were repaired free of charge and painted by volunteers from Rooms to Go. Another remarkable donation was a spray booth, which is housed in a custom container. Before, all the toys were painted, one by one or on small racks, by hand. "Now we roll in a rack of about 100 toys and they are painted by volunteers who hold spray guns," says Helms. The spray booth has boosted production by 4,000 toys per year.

All the wood and paint are donated, although ToyMakers must purchase the wheels and axels in order to be sure that a high-grade, low-moisture maple is used. That way the axels and wheels fit tightly and don't separate from the toy. Glue is applied inside each wheel hub and to the ends of the axels. "We haven't lost a wheel since we initiated this process," quips Helms.



But, of course, the most important donation is the volunteer labor of 20 to 50 adults and teenagers four mornings a week. That is what started ToyMakers of East Lake and keeps it humming. Last year these awesome volunteers gave 21,546 hours of their precious time to "Make (18,000) Smiles One Toy at a Time.

*For more information about ToyMakers of East Lake, to volunteer or to make a donation, go to [www.toymakersofeastlake.org](http://www.toymakersofeastlake.org).*

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