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Volunteer Tony Bauer, 85, pieces together wooden rocking horses at the R.J. Scheffel Memorial Toy Project woodshop. PHOTOS BY MATTHEW DAE SMITH/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

Longtime toy workshop needs financial help to continue efforts



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Volunteers create wooden gifts for 9,000 needy children each year

Volunteers at a pine-dust scented workshop housed in a former appliance store along Old U.S. 27 were busy sawing, sanding, painting and gluing.

The workers call themselves "elves." Their creations that day were bright yellow ducks on wheels, tiny rocking horses for kids at Head Start and stick horses with smiling faces.

R.J. Scheffel Memorial Toy Project has crafted the old-fashioned items for four decades. The project brings joy and comfort to 9,000 area kids each year.

Now, the shop volunteers say they need help.

Donations and grants are down, and the already low-budget operation is running short on money with just \$4,000 in the bank. That's enough to cover rent and utilities for two months. Volunteers said they've already used a \$6,000 fund set aside for equipment repairs to meet monthly obligations.

"I'm concerned," said Peggy McNichol, a CPA and member of the South Lansing Kiwanis Club who volunteers as the group's treasurer. Last year, funds were down 30% over the previous year, she said.

She said the shop's annual budget is \$37,575, that mostly goes to cover rent and utilities. Scheffel uses donated items but must buy some items, such



Volunteer toymakers Rich Patterson, 76, of East Lansing, and Carol Wade, 69, of Perry, put the finishing touches on a variety of wooden toys.

as 20,000 toy wheels each year. There are no paid employees in the group with a few dozen retirees donating their time three mornings a week.

Most of the fundraising will come at an Aug. 15 open house and during the holidays. The group is actively seeking out grants from foundations.

"I'm very hopeful the community will step up and recognize a valuable project," McNichol said.

Toys go to kids in crisis

Some 40% of the toys are distributed to low-income children through the Salvation Army at Christmas. The toys are also distributed to hospitals, shelters and police departments.

The tradition of wooden toy making dates back to 1959, when R.J. Scheffel, a

retired grocer, made wooden toys for children in his Colonial Village neighborhood.

Volunteers, including the Lansing-area Kiwanis clubs, started the project after his death in 1978 at age 89.

The late Jim Hough, who wrote the Onlooker column for the State Journal for 26 years, was instrumental in creating the memorial project.

Hough launched a fundraising effort in 1978, calling Scheffel a "great, old man who dedicated his retirement years to the building of Christmas toys for needy children."

"R.J. Scheffel must never be forgotten," he wrote May 9, 1978. Forty-one years later, Scheffel's name lives on in the DeWitt Township workshop.

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Workshop

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Fire damaged workshop in 2013

Larry Koster, of Lansing, who retired from General Motors as a production scheduling manager, has volunteered at the workshop for more than 20 years. He uses those manufacturing skills to keep the production running at the toy workshop.

Koster, the president, said the group has had its ups and downs before. In 2013, a fire at a Lansing church where they were housed destroyed inventory and damaged its space.

The group moved to its current location, an old appliance store that has room for its various stages of production from the rooms that house the bandsaws and sanders to large tables used for gluing, staining and painting.

Sometimes money comes in unexpected ways, Koster said. A volunteer who died left half the proceeds of a toy train collection to the group, pulling in \$10,000.

Roy Ketcheson, a retired insurance agent from Mason, invited me to come view the workshop. He runs the "back room" where the cutting and sanding is done.

He said the group could use some younger volunteers to build the organization for the future, as well as donations to keep inventory stocked.

"This is the toughest I have seen it here," said Ketcheson, 84, who has volunteered for a decade.

No on-off switches on these toys

At the workshop, I found delightful toys with no on-off switches, flashing lights or built-in sound effects. Children have to use their imaginations and make up their own stories as they play with doll-size cradles and little cars.

While many of the toys are aimed at young children, the group also makes games that would appeal to older children, such as a tiny hockey table where you shoot pennies as pucks with your fingers.

And the No. 1 item produced is a simple wooden box with a hinged lid. The boxes were once given away as jewelry boxes but are now a staple for Ele's Place, which serves grieving children. The



Volunteer Darryl Warncke, of Holt, works a belt sander. MATTHEW DAE SMITH/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

To help

To donate: Send checks to the R.J. Scheffel Memorial Toy Project at P.O. Box 23181, Lansing, MI, 48908-3181.

To attend the Open House: Hours are 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Aug. 15 at 16991 Old U.S. 27, Suite A.

For more information: scheffel-toys.org



Ketcheson

boxes are used as "memory boxes" to house photos and other precious keepsakes.

Ketcheson recently heard from a mother about her son, now 17, who lost his older brother when he was just 9. He

still has the memory box.

"That makes the project all worthwhile when you hear the stories," he said.

Besides the toys, I also found engaged, sharp people in their 70s and 80s who were enjoying their time.

"It's the best job I ever had," said Tony Bauer, 85, of Okemos, a retired Michigan State University professor. He's on the grant writing team but is finding that many funders don't want to pay for overhead. That's the only major cost the toy workshop has.

The elves work hard to deliver toys that stand the test of time at a few dollars per toy, and the project keeps seniors engaged.

It's a win-win for our community.

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