



THE PLAIN DEALER

Volunteers repair, adapt toys for disabled children

By **THOMAS J. SHEERAN**
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CLEVELAND (AP) — Sometimes Santa's workshop needs specialized skills. That's when volunteer students and engineers who normally work on high-tech projects get involved and repair and adapt toys for use by disabled children.

Kevin Day, 22, of suburban Cuyahoga Falls, a mechanical engineering student at Case Western Reserve University, was mindful that Christmas was just days away when he sat down at a folding table on campus for a two-hour stint fixing broken toys or making them disabled-friendly.

"It seemed like a good way to volunteer my time," said Day, frowning as he inspected a stuffed animal that wouldn't squeal when squeezed. "It's supposed to make some kind of sound."

Day, who hopes to make a career designing ultra-small insulating materials with applications for computers, and other volunteers with the nonprofit Replay for Kids organization made it possible for United Cerebral Palsy in Cleveland to give holiday gift toys to youngsters with both disabilities and needy family backgrounds.

"Santa was here and he gave the toys to the kids at our party," said Intesar Taye, clinical director of children's services with the cerebral palsy organization.

The toys, which typically have oversized control buttons easier for disabled children to manipulate, are useful in teaching cause and effect when youngsters see a toy move or sound off in response to a tap of the control panel, Taye said.

The Mantua-based Hattie Larlham group of agencies, which serves disabled people in the region, uses the toys provided by Replay for Kids for its lending library for parents with disabled children.

A toy piano with oversized keys provided by the RePlay for Kids program has helped 13-year-old Ashley Samberg of Bedford, who has cerebral palsy, understand that punching the keys will help her make music, said her mother, Peggy Samberg. Ashley uses a wheelchair and has limited reaching and grabbing abilities.

"She understands it makes music and she likes music," she said Wednesday from home. And getting loaner toys from Hattie Larlham can save money because toys for special needs children can cost four or five times the price of a regular item, Samberg said.

Bill Memberg, a biomedical engineer who runs RePlay for Kids, arranges monthly meetings to repair toys for 14 agencies. Volunteers also make disabled-friendly modifications on donated items, often from the Toys for Tots program run by the Marine Corps Reserve.

Memberg showed off a guitar-playing Big Bird toy with a fingernail-size on-off switch too small for many disabled youngsters to operate. With a new plug connection the toy can be run with a six-inch touch plate, a puff of breath through a tube or a slight head movement against a toggle.

In addition to helping develop muscle movement skills, "a child also benefits psychologically by being able to play with mainstream toys similar to those used by their peers or siblings," Memberg said.

Beth Lewandowski, 35, of Lorain, a Case doctoral student and NASA Glenn Research Center engineer,

said the volunteer sessions provide her with improved manual skills to complement her academic background.

"It's a good opportunity," Lewandowski said as she diagnosed a skittish toy guitar. "In general, I need more hands-on experience," she said.

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On the Net:

Case Western Reserve Univ: <http://www.cwru.edu>

Hattie Larlham: <http://www.hattielarlham.org>

RePlay for Kids: <http://www.replayforkids.org>.

United Cerebral Palsy: <http://www.ucpcleveland.org>

Toys for Tots: <http://www.toysfortots.org/home>

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