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Millennium Fund for Children aids RePlay for Kids

Volunteer elves make toys merrier

Workshops hum with activity to adapt gifts for disabled

By Paula Schleis
Beacon Journal staff writer

Published on Wednesday, Dec 08, 2010



Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities employees Nancy Sherepita (left) Holly Haverkamp and Lorie Pyle pick up toys for their students adapted by RePlay for Kids, a program in which volunteers adapt toys for children with disabilities at the Educational Service Center of Cuyahoga County. (Karen Schiely/Akron Beacon Journal)

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County Developmental Disabilities Board.

From each toy dangled a tell-tale black cord that will allow a child with limited physical functions to activate it by slapping a big button, or blowing into a tube, or nudging a head switch on a wheelchair.

The toys were adapted by RePlay for Kids, a Cuyahoga County-based nonprofit that uses hundreds of area volunteers to convert the toys during workshops throughout the year.

Then, just in time for Christmas, RePlay invites area agencies to snap up the toys for their clients.

This year, the Millennium Fund for Children gave the organization a \$2,000 grant to help in the effort.

The Millennium Fund, maintained by the Akron Community Foundation, is in the midst of its annual fundraising campaign. Each year, the organization asks area residents to donate one hour's pay to support programs that are trying to better the lives of local children.

RePlay is one of 26 programs sharing \$43,000 in grants. All are programs where just a couple of thousand of dollars can make a significant difference.

The seed for RePlay was planted in 1989, when founder Bill Memberg was a biomedical engineer answering a call from a Cuyahoga County agency seeking help in adapting toys for its clients.

It didn't take long for him to realize there were a lot of agencies in the region that could use such a service, so he formed RePlay for Kids and started hosting toy workshops. RePlay was incorporated as a nonprofit in 1999 and expanded into offering free repair of toys and assistive devices for area agencies.

Many of the toys come from the U.S. Marines' Toys For Tots campaign; others are purchased through grant money or donated by companies hosting the workshops.

To an average 4-year-old, the button hidden in a stuffed toy's belly that makes a baby laugh or a bear talk is no challenge at all.

To a child who can't flex fingers or move arms, it's Mount Everest.

But as Jennifer Reigle and Stephanie Davis gathered armfuls of battery-operated playthings, including hopping kangaroos and singing sea horses, they had no doubt the toys would bring hours of smile and giggles from the youngsters served by the Summit

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Many helpers lend hand

The elves who adapt them wear many hats. This year, Memberg hosted 27 workshops at places like law firms, banks, corporate headquarters and NASA Glenn Research Center. The University of Akron is a recent addition to the volunteer army.

Using small, portable tool kits, Memberg said he can teach just about anyone how to find the sound or motion source in a toy and solder on a cable that can be connected to devices used by people with disabilities.

Recently, a year's worth of work disappeared in two hours as representatives from agencies in seven counties shared 318 toys.

"We don't know what they need, so we have them come here and pick them out," Memberg said.

Some agencies give them out as gifts. Others use them for therapy.

The latter is the case at Summit County's DD board, which has taken advantage of RePlay's annual giveaway for three years.

"This is the only place I know of where we can get these," said Davis, who noted that purchasing the same items would be too costly for the organization. "You can't put a value on what they do," she said.

Reigle and Davis spent nearly an hour considering the toys piled high on several tables before selecting 16 items that filled a 3-foot-high box.

"We talked about what [the kids] benefited most from last year," Reigle said.

She added that what makes the RePlay gifts extra special is that they are all mainstream toys.

"The kids get to interact with the same toys their peers do," she said, "just in another way."

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