

Country Santa recruits volunteers for special delivery

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Ever since Santa delivered his first sleigh load of toys, children everywhere have wondered how he manages to get to all the world's children in a single day.

The answer, it turns out, is not magic, at least not in the way that word is commonly used. It has more to do with Santa recruiting excellent help. And for less-fortunate children in Pickens, Oconee and parts of Greenville counties, Buddy Cox - better known as "Country Santa" - is Mr. Claus's point man.

Cox's organization, which has been delivering toys to area children for more than a quarter-century, began small - one child, to be exact.

That year, shortly after Cox and his wife Nell moved to Pumpkintown, a first-grader had come to one of the local elementary school needing new shoes.

Cox, a water-waste equipment sales engineer, heard about the little girl and brought her a pair. When he took them to her, he noticed that her doll had seen better days. So that Christmas, Cox said, he went out and bought her "the biggest box doll I could find" so the girl would have something under the tree Christmas morning.

The year after, armed with names provided by area schools, Cox found toys for 10 children, and the organization expanded exponentially in the years thereafter. In 1986, Cox had to build a 900-foot warehouse to store the toys that had overwhelmed his house.

Today, Country Santa provides toys to children whose names are provided by local schools, churches and social services agencies, as well as some families who seek help from the organization on their own.

This weekend was a busy one at the warehouse. Some 40 volunteers, including two Boy Scout troops and volunteers from Clemson University's Center for Student Involvement, jammed the warehouse, all hunting for toys for children from newborns to 17-year-olds.

Volunteers will continue accepting toys and assembling the gift bags until Dec. 23. At that time a fleet of volunteer drivers from the area will descend on the warehouse in Reece Lane and begin delivering toys in earnest.

In all, the organization expects to help some 800 families with upwards of 2,000 children this year. That number, according to Bob Spalding - who first began working with the organization back in 1983, when they were still working out of Cox's dining room - is a bit down from recent years. Country Santa has helped as many as 1,200 families in a single Christmas.

But they can only help as much as their donations allow. And those donations, Spalding said, were off due to the poor economy. "Times are hard for a lot of families now," he said. "But that's kind of what we're about, helping those families. And we're going to continue helping just as many as we can."

In addition to serving as a driver and all-around coordinator, Spalding serves as the organization's webmaster. At the Country Santa Web site, www.countrysanta.org, he has compiled everything from toy guidelines to drop sites to key dates in the process.

Otherwise, those who are interested in making donations or volunteer should call Country Santa at (864) 898-4422.

 A photograph showing Buddy Cox, wearing a red jacket, seated at a table and looking at a document. Tim Scully, wearing a grey shirt, stands next to him, also looking at the document. They are in a room with shelves of toys in the background.	<p>"Country Santa" Buddy Cox, seated, and volunteer coordinator Tim Scully help keep the assembly process moving on Saturday at Country's Santa's Pumpkintown warehouse. This marks Scully's 10th year as one of Cox's "full-time" volunteers.</p>
 A photograph showing Buddy Cox, wearing a red jacket, seated at a table. Two young Boy Scouts in tan uniforms are standing next to him, looking at something on the table. There are water bottles and other items on the table.	<p>Buddy Cox — better known as "Country Santa" — puts a couple of young volunteers to work assembling gift bags for area children. Chad Wright, standing left and Graham Abrams are Boy Scouts with Troop #37 in Easley</p>