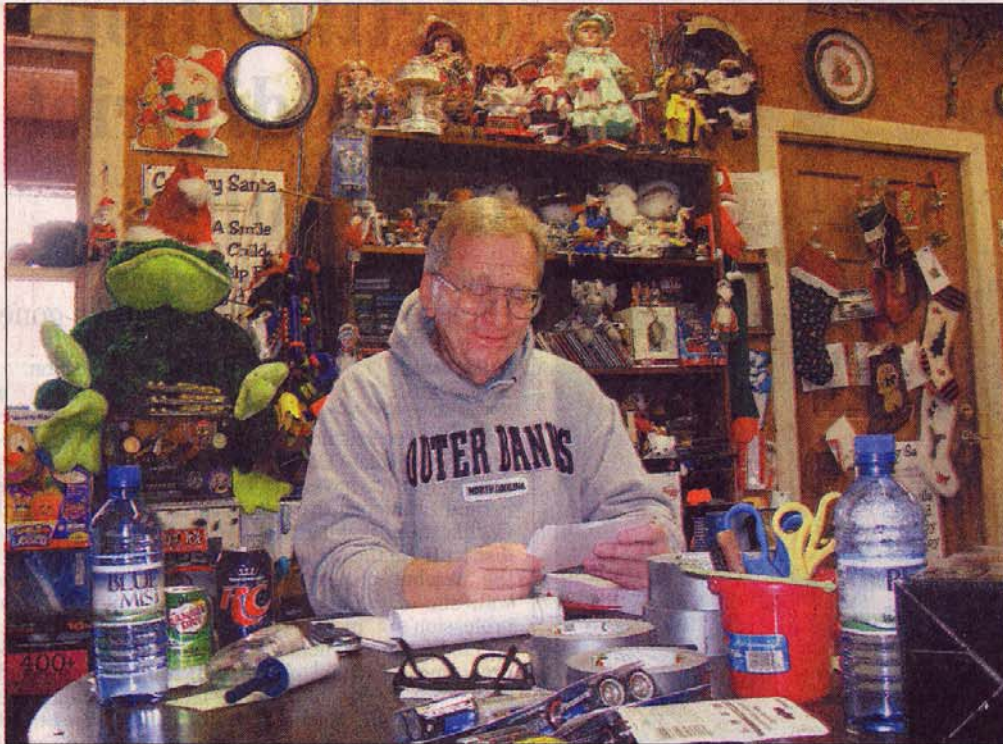


## More toys sought to help kids in need



JULIE HOWLE / Staff

Country Santa, also known as Buddy Cox, checks his list as volunteers prepare gifts for children in need.

# Country Santa's workshop hums with holiday activity

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From inside a small workshop in Pumpkintown, the joy of Christmas emanates through the cold December days as volunteers put in countless hours to help bring Christmas to thousands of children in need.

It is here where Buddy Cox, who has been Country Santa for 32 years, and his crew of elves and other volunteers have been hard at work.

"We have a blast," Cox said. "I think it's a common thread that we really care about the kids and we really care about these families."

Volunteers are collect-

ing, sorting and bagging gifts that they will deliver to children on Christmas Eve throughout the Upstate.

Last year they helped about 3,200 children, Cox said.

"During the weekdays, Monday through Saturday, we're here from almost dawn to dark," he said. "It's just nonstop."

As Beverly McCulty of Pumpkintown worked, Christmas music filled the workshop where toys of all kinds, from dolls and stuffed animals to basketballs and board games, sat stacked on shelves that stretch from floor to ceiling.

"I think it's fantastic," said McCulty, who has

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volunteered with Country Santa for three years.

"I wish I could be at their houses when they get up Christmas morning to see their faces," she said. "It gives me goose bumps. I have them now."

Cox shuts down his sales engineering company each December to do Country Santa. He said volunteers, such as McCulty, help make the whole thing happen.

"We're all volunteers," he said. "They're no paid employees ... It's the volunteers and it's the people who donate to us because

they believe in us, they believe in what we do."

Some who were recipients of Country Santa's gifts now help as volunteers. Others who came as children with their families to volunteer are now grown and bring their own children.

"It's just a patchwork quilt of people from all walks of life and all ages that we pull together to pull this thing off," he said.

And Cox said there's a "core group of elves," about 10 or 12, who "are with me pretty much all the time."

Cox said the toys come from the public.

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# SANTA

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"We are totally dependent on the public," he said. "We can only do what the public allows us to do by donations."

Cox said toy donations at the 50 or so drop locations have been slow and said many people have a tendency to wait until closer to Christmas.

"But even now we should have already started seeing an increase but it seems to still be a little slow," he said. "I think people are having tough times. I think that some of the people who have helped us in the past may have fallen

on tougher times, too."

Cox said he's had to send elves out to do bulk buying continuously.

"We do need the donations," he said.

Karen Dodgens, who is Cox's secretary during the year and helps organize the operation when Country Santa gears up, said this is her 17<sup>th</sup> year helping.

"A lot of times somebody may ask for an item that we don't usually get in and somehow or other a miracle happens and we end up with it," Dodgens said.

Cox said they try to give children "a little bit of hope that things can be better and that somebody cares" and also "try to take away a little bit of the hurt of the family, of the parents because a lot of these parents

are really suffering."

"It hurts the parents not to be able to give the kids something," he said.

Cox said also this year he has been battling kidney disease and said he was diagnosed in September.

Cox started on steroids in November and said he had "some soul searching" to do.

The first week or two with the steroids was the toughest time, Cox said, and he tried to figure out how to keep a business running with a six-month protocol that includes switching between steroids and a light chemotherapy drug. He also thought about Country Santa.

"Was I going to be able to be in this chair every day

for December and do what God wants me to do in this program?" he asked.

Cox said that in October he made the decision that they would try to cut back a little, in part because of his health and "because last year trying to help 3,200 kids put us against the wall anyway."

He said they expect to give to about 3,000 children. And Cox, who is currently on the light chemotherapy drug, said the disease hasn't really slowed him down.

"I'm just blessed because I've got great volunteers that are here every day," he said. "They're here to take care of any slack, any holes that I can't fill and they've just surrounded me."