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Christmas For All spreads cheer to area children

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Photo by Ethan Steinquest - Lebanon Democrat

Juli Kelley, at left, and J.R. Kelley, at right, search out gifts from a child's wish list during Wilson County Christmas For All, a distribution drive running through noon on Dec. 18 that will provide presents for an estimated 2,000 children in Lebanon and Watertown.

Toys for children of all ages line the walls, and workers are busy filling bags of goodies, but this isn't Santa's workshop: it's Wilson County Christmas For All.

The nonprofit organization provides Christmas gifts for children throughout Lebanon and Watertown annually, with this year's distribution running through noon on Dec. 18 at Westland United Methodist Church.

"We usually have around 2,000 kids, and I'm thinking this year it's going to be more," Wilson County Christmas For All board member Linda Schenk said. "We put out applications at the Department of Human Services the third week in October, and it really goes full speed after Thanksgiving."

Wilson County Christmas For All board President Alan Ricketts said the applications are open until Dec. 11 this year.

"The only screening we have is that we look to make sure the kids are enrolled in school in Wilson County," he said. "We don't go into a lot of analysis about income and all that stuff, we leave that up to the people applying."

Children from birth to age 15 send in their Christmas wish lists through the applications, and volunteers known as "Shoppers" spend the distribution period finding the perfect gifts from the organization's stock.

"This is my third year volunteering," Tammy Blanchard said. "We get a list of the kids' names and ages, and the things they're hoping Santa brings. Then we try and fill our shopping bags to make all the children happy. It's very heartwarming and fulfilling, just knowing they're all going to have a happy, merry Christmas."

From L.O.L. Surprise! dolls and bicycles to Avengers merchandise and art supplies, the volunteers have plenty of toys to choose from, and Wilson County Christmas For All Purchasing Agent Juli Kelley spends the year making sure of it.

"We start stocking up on toys for the next year on Dec. 26," she said. "They're purchased year-round, and there are quite a few stores that really work with us to make sure we can get everything we need."

Kelley stays on the lookout for deals and makes frequent stops at locations like Walmart. The toys are kept in storage for

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most of the year and moved into Westland for distribution come Christmas season.

"I buy whatever I can get good deals on, and it always works out that we can get a vast array of toys," she said. "We've had several parents call back really very emotional, saying the gifts were amazing. I'm known as the Christmas Lady around town, and we're blessed to be part of such an amazing group of people. I tell people that because I truly believe it."

Money used to buy the toys comes from community donations and fundraisers throughout the year, and one of the chief contributors is the Lebanon Fire Department.

"Decades and decades ago, the fire department was a place people would bring broken toys to be fixed up," Lebanon Fire Department Cpt. Brian Fountain said. "None of us have a true starting date, but there's an old picture floating around from at least 67 years ago. We're just continuing to try and pay it forward, to take what the professionals at Lebanon Fire before us thought was important to the community and continue that."

The firefighters host the Lebanon Fire Department Spirit of Christmas Toy Drive throughout the year, and the department's Golf for Toys Scramble in the fall serves as a major fundraiser for Christmas For All.

"Every year it's heartwarming to see the community get behind the kids here that don't have toys and put a smile on their faces come Christmas," Fountain said. "SERVPRO of Wilson County has been the title sponsor for our golf tournament the last few years, and they've been a huge help for us in publicizing the event and getting other players and businesses on board. We had over 20 teams this year, and that's the most we've had in the last four or five."

Ricketts said contributions like that from organizations across the community are essential to Christmas For All, and help keep the drive a tradition in Wilson County.

"I have the easiest job in the world," he said. "It's kids and Christmas. People want to give, and all you've got to do is show them you're going to do the right thing with their money. That's what we hope to do, with each gift we give the kids, is to create positive memories."