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“All about the kids”

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Wilson County Christmas for All board members Jill Booker (at left) and Nickie Zang compile a package of toys for one of the children who will benefit from the program.

Craig Harris/Lebanon Democrat

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As far as Rick Smith is concerned, all means all.

And his organization is attempting to help the most that it can.

It's not a hobby per se, but Smith has become a toy collector.

And he's now transitioning into a toy distributor as the president of the Wilson County Christmas for All program.

"There are no qualifications," Smith said. "The only qualification is age.

"If they tell us they need it, they need it."

The beginning of the program is believed to date back to the 1940s or 1950s, when the Lebanon Fire Department collected and distributed toys to children for Christmas.

The Wilson County Department of Human Services (DHS) helped with the distribution of the toys to needy families in the eastern portion of the county.

As the program continued to expand, it became too great for the fire department and DHS to maintain, which is when the BellSouth Pioneers — who were retired BellSouth employees — became the leaders of the project, though the fire department and DHS provided support.

Eventually, in the late 1990s, the program grew to the point to where that the BellSouth Pioneers couldn't maintain it either, which is when a group of citizens officially formed the Wilson County Christmas for All program, which became a charitable, non-profit organization in 2005.

"Word of mouth is a primary factor," Smith said. "It's been going on for years. It started off with the fire department in the 40s or 50s. They would bring in toys or refurbish bicycles. It's just progressed from there.

"People know Christmas for All because of the legacy of the Christmas for All."

The DHS and the fire department are still heavily involved in the program, helping to provide toys to the children east of Highway 109.

Big Brothers of Mt Juliet, which is aided by Mothers Toy Store, provides toys for children who reside west of 109.

The Lebanon Fire Department held a golf tournament earlier in November — which consisted of 27 teams competing at Lebanon County Club — to raise money for the program.

"That's a huge help to us," Smith said. "The fire department has always been collecting money in different avenues."

Other organizations contribute significantly as well.

"We have churches who will put up an Angel Tree, and we will provide the names for them," Smith said. "There's one that does 75 names, one that does 30, one that does 50 ... that makes it easier for us."

Any child age 13 and younger is eligible.

"All applications have to be turned in to the DHS," Smith said. "We take that kid's name and shop for that kid. We'll buy \$40 or \$50 of toys for that child.

"We feel like that if somebody is willing to take an application to DHS, they deserve that application. We take anybody, but we try to aim our resources at (the eastern half of the county)."

Previously, the organization provided toys for children age 15 and younger but moved the age to 13 a few years ago.

"We've seen a pick-up (in numbers recently)," Smith said. "In the past, we've had larger numbers. A couple of years ago, we were up to 15 years (of age), but toys are getting harder to find. So, we backed off from 15-year-olds to 13-year-olds.

"We can't be everything to everybody, but we try to help out and get the right stuff to the right people to help out."

The process of accumulating the toys — which vary from sports equipment to games to baby dolls — is ongoing throughout the year.

"We bring in volunteers from churches, girl scouts, boy scouts, individuals that just want to help out," Smith said. "We have to buy the toys. We have to warehouse the toys. We start at the first of the year and don't ever really stop. We try to find whatever bargain there is, a two-for-one or three-for-one ... whatever is a good buy. We're in shopping mode now."

Those volunteers assume a variety of tasks.

"We have people who help us with distribution," Smith said. "We have people that help us with shopping. The fire department is huge with this.

"It would be hard to number it (all the volunteers). We have the core group, but then, we have people who just come in for just an hour or two to volunteer. We have people giving money. We have the fire department that helps out tremendously, sorting the toys. It's in the hundreds (of volunteers). It's just huge. Some of these people put in hundreds of hours helping these kids out."

Smith has been a board member for five years and is currently serving as the president for the second year.

Rusty Clemmons is among the eight-member board of directors, along with Smith.

"I'm just really blessed," Clemmons said. "It's my third or fourth year. I'm really enjoying it.

"A friend of mine mentioned it to me. It's to help the kids this time of year. It's a time of year to give."

The program is expecting to provide toys for between 2,300 and 2,500 children this year.

Applications for the program must be turned in by Friday.

However, for those who turned in applications early on, the distribution process has already begun. Christmas for All organizers began giving out the gifts two weeks ago, and after taking Thanksgiving week off, they'll continue distributing the gifts this week.

"We'll actually call them and tell them the gifts are ready (for pick-up)," Smith said. "You don't really appreciate it until somebody comes up to you and says ... they will say, 'We were overwhelmed with Christmas and didn't know what we were going to do, and you came to the rescue.' It's fulfilling in that way.

"It's all about the kids. To know you are putting a smile on a kid's face, it's a big smile-maker."
