

Woodturners Commentary

At this time of year we invariably discover newsworthy tales of altruism. They come as a welcome relief from the stories so emphasizing the dark side of our nature that it appears to be the only side.

Years ago I bought a lathe and went searching for people who could teach me how to use it. I found a small group of craftsman who met now and then to share tricks of the trade. Despite my ignorance I was readily welcomed among them. Then I thought I was lucky, now I know I was privileged. I've learned a little about woodturning but more about generosity.

In the 1991 I was elected Wood Turners Club president while concurrently serving as Board Chairman of the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Western New York. This dual role allowed me to begin what has become an annual tradition of producing wooden toys for the Cerebral Palsy Association's Children's Center. The club's 80 plus men and women took on this project with incredible enthusiasm, contributing upwards of 300 individually designed and crafted items such as cars, trains, tops, pull toys, blocks, and age-appropriate games and puzzles. Now, five years later, the tradition continues and grows.

To ensure the maximum benefit of this project, the Club leadership works closely with the Agency's professional staff whose enthusiasm is exceeded only by the children and the Club members. The guiding criteria are simple: safety, durability, washability, and usability by kids with varying degrees of physical limitations. Beyond that, the imagination, skill, and initiative of the membership yield a stunning cornucopia of creations to delight, amuse, and educate special kids who now enjoy a more special Christmas because of the talent and generosity of men and women who know the real meaning of a good turn.

Invariably, innovative projects attract attention from various quarters with some fascinating and surprising consequences. Shortly before Christmas 1993, the second year of this initiative, a woman living in a rural community outside Buffalo happened to see a television spot prominently featuring our project. With considerable persistence she tracked us down and volunteered a supply of hardwood toward the effort. She also enlisted the support of a boyfriend who lives a reclusive life in a forested region well south of Buffalo. For reasons known only to

him, he harvests, mills, and stores hardwoods from his remote forest property. Seizing the opportunity, a pickup truck with several of our members visited our “hermit” benefactor, returning with a load of apple, cherry, oak, and other hardwoods that became a highlight of a special Christmas for children he’s never met at a place he’ll never see. A project that began as a simple way of sharing with some children who will never know the satisfaction of a craft requiring finely tuned mental and physical skill, has not only grown, but, as such things often do, led to a reversal of roles between master and student. Now they teach us the meaning and value of what is easily taken for granted.

Ray Bissonette

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