

UT staff build toys from scrap for Orange Santa

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Carpenters Armando Blanco and Jeff Bachschmid look at their work in UT's Facilities complex Tuesday.

Elves don't always wear red and green. This year, some of Santa's helpers may be found decked out in burnt orange.

Employees of UT's Project Management and Construction Services have transformed the Facilities Complex on Manor Road into a veritable Santa's workshop, building handmade toys for UT's Orange Santa program.

In a little more than a month and a half, the employees have crafted almost 60 wooden toys for donation.

Orange Santa is a campus-wide donation drive intended to collect toys and gift cards for UT students, faculty and staff with special needs during the holiday season. Founded in 1994, the program served 485 families and more than 1,750 children last year.

"At the time it was founded, it was an effort to foster a greater sense of community within the campus and to provide a means by which students, faculty and staff could express their generosity," said Susan Clagett, associate vice president for public affairs.

From Dec. 6-9, needy UT families can pick up free gifts for their children at a gym-turned-holiday store in Belmont Hall. The UT employees' handmade gifts will be included in the selection.

Clagett said the handmade gifts will be particularly meaningful.

“These are gifts that children will have forever,” Clagett said. “They are not going to break, they’re not disposable, and they’re a keepsake and a memory.”

Employees used leftover wood and paint during spare time between projects to construct the wooden airplanes, cars, trains and doll cribs. Each toy took about 30 minutes to an hour to craft. Carpenter George Ulloa said he hopes the workshop can continue to work all year long to have even more toys for next year.

“If they’re going to throw [the scrap] away, we might as well put it to use,” Ulloa said.

Billy Bailey, assistant supervisor for technical trades, said his employees were excited when they approached him with the idea.

“I’m behind it 100 percent,” Bailey said. “It’s the right thing to do for the University and for the kids.”

Carpenter Armando Blanco said most of his workshop participated in the toy construction.

“It’s good for morale, and it’s brought the shop together,” Blanco said. “The kids wind up with some toys, and we can use the skills we have to do this.”

Clagett said the handmade toys represent the spirit of the Orange Santa program.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Clagett said. “It’s a sharing of talents and an expression of thoughtfulness and caring by members of that staff.”

Blanco said he and his colleagues feel good about their work and their contribution to the UT community.

“It’s very rewarding to be able to take a scrap piece of wood and make a toy out of it,” Blanco said. “This is something the University can be proud of. We’re state employees, and we can do something for the kids and needy people.”

Building the toys has also helped the workshop get into the holiday spirit.

“We were talking about how we should have elf hats,” said carpenter Jeffrey Bachschmid. “We feel like Santa’s helpers.”