



Santa's WORKSHOP

The Happy Factory builds toys for kids in need all over the world.



It's 4 a.m. on a Monday morning, and 80-year-old Donna Cooley (above) of Cedar City, UT, is already awake, sorting pieces of scrap wood into piles. She keeps the mahogany, maple and black walnut, and tosses soft pinewood because it causes splinters. In the next few hours, her workshop—called The Happy Factory, her “home away from home”—will fill with up to 50 volunteers, from college students to retirees, ready to spend their day sawing, drilling and sanding the wood into six different types of toy cars. They make about 100 cars every day, and each one is shipped to a sick or underprivileged child in America and also to children in countries around the world.

The giving spirit

“My late husband, Charlie, used to tell me, ‘We may not be able to make a toy for every child in the world who needs one, but we’re going to try,’” says Donna.

Charlie and Donna picked up toy making when they retired in 1995. At the start they only crafted items for their grandkids, but in February 1998, after they gave extras to a children’s hospital, they were inspired to start a nonprofit.

“The lady who accepted the toys had tears on her face. We realized we had found a way to use our free time for good,” says Donna.

The couple began regularly donating to the hospital. They tried to keep it a secret, but word quickly spread. Police departments, shelters, global aid organizations, and more started requesting toys. A professor at Southern Utah University, where Donna and Charlie had worked,

gave 5% of her estate to purchase tools. Cabinet shops supplied wood, and donations helped move the factory out of Charlie and Donna’s garage and into its own building.

Spreading joy

So far The Happy Factory has donated more than 1.3 million toys to needy kids. Though Charlie passed away in 2011, his impact lives on. Donna receives many thankful letters for her work, and her favorite sight is the smile of a child holding a toy. “Everyone saw this purpose and came together,” she says. “It has changed my life. I’m surrounded by good people every day. You can’t ask for anything better than that.”

Support The Happy Factory by visiting happyfactory.org.



Kids from Kathmandu, Nepal, with their new toys.