

SANTA



Country Santa, Buddy Cox, makes his list and checks it twice at his workshop earlier this week. Country Santa delivers toys to thousands of children around the Upstate each year.

'A Labor of Love'

Country Santa makes Christmas magical



Nicole Dougherty
Staff Reporter

During dinner one night last week, Ella mentioned that she had overheard one of the kids in her class saying that there was not going to be a Christmas tree or ornaments in this child's home, because the family could not afford to have those things this year. She wanted to pack up our tree and ornaments and take them to school to give to her classmates.

Tricked by the spirit of generosity, I called the next day to see what we could do to help this child. I was informed that the child had been placed on Country Santa's list. This conversation was the second or third time I had heard the name Country Santa mentioned, and my curiosity led me to Google, which led me to an amazingly heart-warming opportunity.

I was able to visit Country Santa, John "Buddy" Cox, his elves and the magical workshop where he and his group of dedicated, selfless volunteers spend countless hours from the day after Thanksgiving until Christmas Eve to ensure that children across the upstate experience the wonder



Children from Central Elementary School volunteer at Country Santa's workshop on a field trip earlier this week.

and magic of Christmas even if their families are not financially capable of providing it themselves.

Predestination: John Cox believes that his childhood experiences prepared him for the role he plays today. When he was 10, Cox's father walked out of his life, leaving his mother to support Buddy and two older sisters, by herself, in the rural South Carolina town of Cross Hill.

"I know she struggled to get something under the tree for us at Christmas," said Cox.

Cox has fond memories of Christmas throughout his childhood. These memories, combined with the first-hand experiences of struggling and financial hardship, inspired the Country Santa program, which began in 1979 and continues

to flourish today — more than 30 years later.

"The Anderson Independent wrote a story about this program years ago. It was titled *Legacy of Love*," said Cox. "And that is what the Country Santa is really all about."

The Country Santa program delivers Christmas miracles to approximately 3,000 to 3,200 children and families in Pickens, Oconee, Northern Greenville and Anderson counties, making it the largest outreach of its kind in the state of South Carolina.

"The fact that we are able to reach so many families down 1,000 feet of driveway, in PurpleHillsville, in Pickens County is a tribute to the great group of people who volunteer to make the Country Santa program happen every year," said Cox.

When Cox first started the Country Santa program, he worked out of his home, but the program grew so large it couldn't be managed there anymore. In 1988, he built a 30 x 30 building that functions as Santa's workshops.

All the toys housed within are incredibly well-organized, and Country Santa's elves work joyfully together — the real-life epitome of the Christmas movie characters sans the poetry cars.

Bob Spaulding has been working as one of Country



Country Santa volunteer Tim Scalley surveys the shelves full of toys waiting to be sorted and bagged.

managing all the toys and gifts that have been bagged up and labeled for a specifically designated family.

Just like Santa and the Elves at the North Pole, Spaul-

ding and the other volunteers ensure that the bagged gifts and families match up correctly. Making sure that thousands

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The bags full of presents from a mountain at Country Santa's



Karen Wilson lost her six year old daughter, Jennifer, to cancer. She has been volunteering for the Country Santa program for the last 15 years in memory of her little girl. The original note Karen left with the bags of donated toys she and her co-workers at Southern Bell collected 15 years ago hangs on the wall of Country Santa's Workshop. "A lot of people come in here with emotional wounds. I've had many come in here and weep," said Cox. "There is something about