

Don't give them junk

It's that time of the year again.

Friday will officially kickoff the 2006 Christmas shopping season, although if you believe the decorations in the stores, that began somewhere around Nov. 1 when they found extra space after getting rid of all their Halloween candy.

Friday also kicks off the 2006 Christmas giving season. I know most gifts are not given any earlier than Christmas Eve, but those are the ones to your mom, dad, wife, girlfriend or cousin Irv. The gifts I'm talking about are the ones that we give to strangers just because it's the right thing to do.

It's a sad fact that not everybody in our area can enjoy the Christmas spirit. Textile mill closings, the Carolina Investors scandal and other happenings have left some very good people out of work. If you think you struggle from paycheck to paycheck, you ought to try it without the paycheck.

Many who have fallen upon hard times have children who will wake up on Christmas morning with no gifts under the tree (well, actually, there probably won't be a tree either) unless somebody is selfless enough to give them a hand.

Well, fortunately, we live in an area where there are plenty of people who are willing to lend a hand. There are countless programs that reach out to help the underprivileged at Christmas time. I've been fortunate enough to be involved with several of them. But my roots go furtherist back with the Country Santa program.

Most of you know about Country Santa, but let me repeat his origin for those of you who are just tuning in.

More than a quarter of a century ago, a Pumpkintown man named Buddy Cox noticed that some of his neighbors were struggling at Christmas time and were not going to be able to



supply presents for their children at Christmas time.

Cox had grown up in a single-parent home himself, and while his mother struggled to make ends meet for the family, there's no way she could have made it without the support of some ladies from a nearby church.

Cox remembered the kindness shown to him as a child, and felt it was his duty to return the kindness to others now that he was a successful businessman. So Cox bought presents for a handful of families that year.

The next year Cox expanded his mission a little, and accepted help from some of his friends — the first Country Santa elves. The next year a few more families were served. And more elves helped.

The program continued to grow. For the past few years, Country Santa has delivered to more than 900 families annually, accounting for about 2,200 kids.

Considering that each child receives more than \$50 worth of toys, a conservative guess on the

amount of toys necessary on a normal year would be somewhere around \$110,000 worth of toys. More likely the figure is closer to \$150,000.

That's a lot of toys to be collected, sorted, bagged and distributed in just over a month.

As I said earlier, I've been involved with Country Santa for more than a decade. My duties with the organization are varied. Every year I write a story or two for this newspaper to promote Country Santa.

I also serve as one of the elves who deliver the toys on Christmas Eve. My brother Thom actually comes up from Florence to help me each year.

And most years, when other elves cannot find a home to deliver toys to, Buddy calls upon me to give it one more shot. With the journalistic skills I've learned from quite a few years in this business, combined with the detective skills I've learned from reading Batman comic books, I'm usually pretty successful in finding people, although sometimes it takes until Christmas Day to complete my rounds.

There is one other duty that Country Santa relies upon me for. Since this is a charity that depends on the kindness of strangers, public relations is very important. And while people have their hearts in the right place, sometimes their efforts are not contributing to the success of the overall project.

There are things that need to be said bluntly, but it doesn't look good for Country Santa or his elves to say them.

Me? I can be blunt. Some dare say offensive. So I'll say it:

Don't give Country Santa junk.

Unfortunately some folks are giving stuff to Country Santa simply because the toy dropoff point is closest to their house than the landfill. Stuffed animals that are torn

or smelly, puzzles or games that have pieces missing and beauty sets with cracked mirrors are among the gifts that people have provided out of the "goodness" of their hearts.

The problem is that Country Santa is supposed to be a way to let these precious children and their parents know that somebody cares about them. Junk just doesn't do the trick, and Buddy and his elves refuse to put anything in a bag that they wouldn't give their own children.

Some elves have estimated that 80 percent of the used toys given have to be thrown away. That may be a high estimate, or it may be a safe guess. Still, if the elves have to sort through the junk donations to find the ones that are worthy of being presents, that adds countless man-hours to the entire process — hours that Country Santa simply does not have.

We don't want to say we won't accept any "used" toys. We prefer to call them "nearly new" or "lightly used." But we would prefer new toys when possible.

So Friday, when you're doing your annual "clean out the kids toybox to make room for what Santa brings this year routine," make sure you take time to consider what toys will make a quality gift for another child.

And if you're planning to spend your day shopping, as so many folks generally do on this day, why not pick up a couple of board games, or perhaps Walkman radios or curling irons for the older children, and bring those to a drop off point.

By the way, the Easley Progress offices at 205 Russell Street will again be a dropoff point for Country Santa. We look forward to seeing you come by.

Contact Ben Robinson at brobinson@theeasleyprogress.com or 855-0355; ext. 20.