

Country Santa to spread cheer to needy kids

By Laura Stokes
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

PUMPKINTOWN — While some holiday shoppers are pushing and shoving to get the latest in video gaming or elbowing their fellow man in the ribs to get ahold of the last plasma TV at slashed prices, the true meaning of Christmas is gently unfolding in a little cabin in the tiny community of Pumpkintown.

Buddy Cox, better known as Country Santa as Christmas nears, is cleaning out the cobwebs and beginning to stock the shelves of his workshop, where gifts for more than 2,000 Upstate children will pass through in the next month.

"Sometimes we squeeze the life out of it," Cox said of Christmas. But up in this workshop is where that life is poured back into Christmas and overflows into everyone who makes Country Santa a part of their holiday.

"It's December that I look forward to every year and the sad thing is, it has to end," said Tim Sculley, one of Cox's "head elves," as he calls him. "This is just a different place than the other 11 months out of the year."

"They have withdrawal when it's done. They show up on the 26th and want to clean up," said Cox of his elves. "It's totally apart



JIMMY BURNETTE

Checking it twice: Buddy Cox completes the paperwork on the families in the Country Santa program. Country Santa elves will later deliver gifts based on the families' wish lists.

WANT TO HELP?

■ For more information about making donations, volunteering or to request assistance, call the Country Santa hotline at 898-4422 or visit the web site at www.countrysanta.org.

from the world. It's a different feeling up there. It's not just about toys. It's about people taking time to help the needy. People who never have come up here and felt it, they don't know."

In its 28th year, the Country Santa program runs like a fine tuned machine, albeit a machine working overtime. Cox closes his business for the month of December and his secretary, Karen Dodgens, transitions into keeper of the list. Dodgens fields requests from needy children and makes sure they are not being

helped by other agencies this Christmas. She types up information sheets on each family that Country Santa will help, usually amounting to about 2,000 children in the Upstate.

Donations of toys are stacked on the shelves of the workshop and volunteers fill Hefty bags with about \$50 worth of toys for each child and a sheet of paper with a simple message — "Merry Christmas from Jesus and Country Santa." The bags are then numbered and stored in the tractor shed.

"We'll have 1,200-1,300 Hefty bags full of toys ready to put out on the field on the 23rd," Cox said.

And on Christmas Eve, volunteers will line up in their vehicles and wait for the coveted opportunity to load up a few bags and deliver them to the children.