

Don't give them junk



missing. Dolls missing an arm or a leg.

Buddy Cox, Country Santa himself, is too nice to say this. But I'm not.

Don't dump your junk on these kids.

I should say don't try to dump your junk on these kids.

Buddy has a pretty high standard for what kind of donations he'll actually accept. "I don't put anything in those bags that I wouldn't give to my own children," Buddy said.

Unfortunately, some of Country Santa's elves have to waste time disposing of undesirable donations.

"Some people just use us as a shortcut to the county dump," Buddy said.

To understand why its so important that we give our best to these kids, you need to understand the true purpose of Country Santa.

Many people think that the only reason Buddy Cox takes a month off from his business each month and works with a team of volunteers to deliver more than \$100,000 worth of donated toys is so that kids will have something to play with on Christmas morning.

That's the end result. But that's not the purpose of the program.

The purpose of the program is to make sure these kids know that there are people out there who love them.

Well, let's not just limit it to

the kids. Let's start with the parents. With very few exceptions, people love their children more than they love themselves. Sometimes their actions don't show it, but more often than not that comes from not knowing how to raise a child rather than from any vicious negligence.

For most people, if you do something for their child, you've done something for them.

I've delivered for Country Santa for many years. I'll admit, sometimes I've come to homes and been turned off by the attitude of the parents. "We were wondering when you were coming," I've been told more than once. "What took you so long?"

But thankfully, that's the exception and not the rule. Most of the time the parents are gracious and thankful. More than once a man or a woman has had tears in their eyes as they told me "thank you." I generally joined them. I wished that the folks actually responsible for the bag of toys could have been there to share.

One Christmas morning several years ago, I left the house early to go to the Easley Post Office.

One of my jobs with Country Santa is to go back after all the deliveries have been attempted and see if there are any bags of toys that have been returned because the driver couldn't find the family that was supposed to receive the gift.

I generally take those bags and try to find the families. Through years of working for a newspaper and from watching more than a few episodes of *Columbo*, I've developed some investigative skills, and I generally can track down the families and get the gifts delivered. Unfortunately, I've also failed in my mission more than once.

This particular year was different, though. A woman was hiding from her abusive husband. I can only imagine the kind of hell that man had put her through.

She did not want to reveal where she was staying. She thought this whole "Country Santa" thing was some elaborate hoax her husband concocted to

lure her out of hiding so she could take another beating.

I spoke with her on the phone from Buddy's house. "Miss, I'm Ben Robinson from *The Easley Progress*," I said.

She didn't seem too impressed. Guess her husband didn't let her read *Ben's World* either.

"I promise you'll be safe," I said. "We can meet in a public place."

By this time it was already dark on Christmas Eve. "Not tonight," she said. "It's too dark. He might be hiding somewhere."

After a few more minutes of conversation, she reluctantly agreed to meet in the parking lot of the Easley post office on Christmas morning.

I arrived at 9 a.m. She was a few minutes late. I noticed the same car drive by the place twice before finally pulling into the parking lot.

She was visibly shaking when she got out of the car. She looked around at the empty parking lot.

I reached into the truck and pulled out a bag of toys and a tricycle. "Merry Christmas from Country Santa and Jesus," I said.

She slowly reached for the toys and placed them inside her car. She looked around once more before turning to me.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"It's not me, miss," I said.

"These are from Country Santa. There's a lot of people who work together to bring those toys to you. And they care about you and your children."

Tears rolled down her cheeks. "Tell them 'thank you' for me," she said.

She drove off. I jumped back into the truck and went on to enjoy one of the best Christmas Days I can remember.

Sometimes I wonder what has happened to that lady. I hope life has been better to her. I can look back at that incident and be thankful of two things. First, I was fortunate enough to have been involved with an effort that brings so much joy into the lives of people in need.

Secondly, I can be proud that there wasn't a single broken Barbie doll in that bag of toys.

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