

Miracle of Country Santa continues

By Ben Robinson
Editor

From now until Christmas Day, Buddy Cox won't have much time for reflection.

Cox is Country Santa, the leader of an all-volunteer effort that supplied toys for more than 2,000 underprivileged children last year.

The size of the program is amazing. Consider that each child receives at least \$50 worth of toys (a conservative estimate). That means Country Santa handles more than \$100,000 worth of toys.

Yet the program remains rather simple. There's only one person in charge, and that's Cox.

"We don't have a board of directors, an advisory council or anything like that," Cox said. "This is just people helping people on the most basic level.

Volunteers are life's blood of Country Santa.

"It's amazing," Cox said. "I don't have to call people and say, 'Hey, it's time for Country Santa, can you help us again this year?' People just start showing up after Thanksgiving. And we need everybody that shows up."

In order to fill all of Country Santa's "orders," volunteers starting bagging toys in early December.

"It just takes that long to get all of this organized and the toys sorted and bagged," Cox said. "Plus, by bagging the toys as we go, we have a pretty good idea of what toys for any particular age group we're running low on."

Donations are picked up daily

from various dropoff points (including the Easley Progress office at 205 Russell Street). Obviously, it takes a lot of donations to meet Country Santa's needs.

"It gets tougher every year," Cox said. "Every year there's some point in which I say to myself, 'We're not going to make it.' But somehow, things fall into place. I've learned to live on faith."

Cox began the Country Santa more than 25 years ago. He grew up in a single-parent family, and his mother relied on the kindness of people from a nearby church to help her make ends meet.

"My mother worked hard to provide for me and my sister," Cox said. "But we never had much. She couldn't have made it without the love and support of those ladies from the church."

When Cox grew up and finished college, he started a successful career as an engineer. He noticed that some of his neighbors would not be able to buy Christmas presents for their children.

"That really broke my heart," Cox said. "I can't imagine how unloved a child would feel if he woke up Christmas morning and found nothing under the tree."

Cox decided to do something about it, buying gifts for two or three families. The next year, he expanded, collecting donations for more families, and gaining the help of a handful of volunteers.

The program has grown consistently every year since.

Cox has built "Country Santa's Workshop" outside his Pumpkintown home, and has also added another building to help

store toy donations.

How does Country Santa continue to operate after all these years?

"It's really a miracle," Cox said. "You can call it the magic of Christmas. It's nothing I do, because there is no way I could have plotted out a way to collect all of these toys and deliver them to 2,000 kids every year. There's a greater power behind this — a power that stirs people's hearts and lets them reach out with love for a child in need."

There are a few things that Country Santa does not tolerate. One is that he doesn't allow television cameras to go with drivers on Christmas Eve to film reports of the deliveries.

"The people who receive these gifts have a right to their privacy," Cox said. "I will not allow them to be humiliated just to get a story on television or in a newspaper."

He also will not tolerate anyone speaking ill of the people that Country Santa helps.

"I hear people say that the parents of these children could do better," Cox said. "And in some cases, that's true. But so what? These are kids we're talking about. They can't pick what family they're born into. And I would say that the majority of people we serve are honest, hard-working folks who have had a string of bad luck. If you've never been there, it's difficult to understand. But I know that several people who now volunteer to help used to receive help from Country Santa. That tells me that love is contagious. They want to give back a little of what they got."