

Faith leads Country Santa through tough year

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PUMPKINTOWN — “I can see the storm coming, but I just don’t know what to do about it,” Buddy Cox said.

Cox, known for the past quarter of a century as “Country Santa,” isn’t referring to the much-needed moisture from the sky.

The bad weather he foresees is a storm of need this Christmas.

Last year Country Santa provided toys to more than 800 Upstate families with more than 2,200 children. With the economy in havoc, Cox knows that more families will need help this Christmas.

“If you do the math, it doesn’t add up,” Cox said. “More people are needing help, less people are able to give. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out something doesn’t work about that equation.”

Fortunately, Cox doesn’t base his program on math. He bases it on faith.

“I have to have faith,” Cox said. “I couldn’t go on any other way. I’ve just got to believe that the people who are able to give will dig just a little deeper in their pockets this year to help make up for those who cannot help us.”

Cox’s Country Santa program recently earned “Angel” status from the S.C. Secretary of State’s office. The Secretary of State annually awards “Angel” status to charities who give back a large portion of the funds they receive.

“They said we give back something like 97 or 98 percent of what we receive,” Cox said. “Really, it’s probably more like 110 percent, when you consider the times when my elves reach into their own pockets to help out.”

Country Santa began three decades ago when Cox, who grew up in an impoverished, single-parent home, looked around his community in Pumpkintown and noticed some of his neighbors would

not be able to provide presents for their children that Christmas.

Remembering how he, his mother and his little sister had depended upon the kindness of others, Cox decided to purchase presents for a few neighbors.

Cox, by that point, had graduated from college with a degree in engineering, and began his own successful firm.

“Whatever I had in life, I owed in part to those people who helped my mother when I was growing up,” Cox said. “It just wouldn’t be right for me not to share the benefits of those people’s kindness with others.”

The next year, Cox shared his efforts with a few friends, and more families were served. The program continued to grow, topping the 2,000 children mark a few years ago.

Growth is not always good.

“I hate to see our program grow,” Cox said. “I hate it for two reasons. One, that means there’s that many more people in need out there. The toys we provide the children do not help people make ends meet through difficult times. I don’t like to see children suffer. I would love it if someday there was no need for Country Santa.”

The other reason is because I have enough common sense to know that if we keep on growing, there will come a time when we’re not able to meet everyone’s need. I can’t stand to think of the look on a child’s face when he or she doesn’t receive anything for Christmas.”

Actually, the program has been operating in the red for the past few years.

“With cash donations, we developed a savings account over the years,” Cox said. “That account allows us to have cash to help start up things each year. The past few years we’ve taken more out of that account than we’ve been able to put back.”

Cox has tried to limit the program. He noticed few donations came from the Greenville

County area, so he no longer delivers toys there.

“The people who give expect their neighbors to be taken care of first,” Cox said.

Despite the bleak prospects this Christmas, Cox still believes in people.

“I believe that regardless of the economy, people want to help people,” Cox said. “That’s what has kept us going for so long, and that’s what we’re counting on this year.”