HAPPY THANKSGIVING

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WEDNESDAY, NOV. 26, 2014 — 146TH YEAR — NO. 115 NEWS LEADER OF THE PAJARO VALLEY ONE DOLLAR

Toys for Tots gears up for 26th year

100 percent of donations received in this county stay in county

By VALERIE LEMKE
FOR THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

WATSONVILLE — Though snow may not be in the forecast for Santa Cruz County anytime soon, there is a special place located inside of a Watsonville warehouse that is beginning to look a lot like the North Pole this time of year.

Toys for Tots of Santa Cruz County is once again preparing to put its toy workshop back into action as they take on their 26th year of service to local kids and families in need.

The Toys for Tots program started in 1947 when Maj. Bill Hendricks of the United States Marine Corps Reserve, and his wife, Diane, tried to donate a handmade doll to a child in need, but found no organization to do so. Hendricks decided to form a charity drive to provide gifts to kids in need, and as a result, more than 5,000 toys were donated that year. In 1948, the United States Marine Corps adopted this drive and turned it into a nationwide community action project known as U.S. Marine Corps Reserves Toys for Tots Program.

That same year, Walt Disney designed the well-known train logo and created the first poster used nationally to advertise their campaign.

Toys for Tots of Santa Cruz County has its own history that was formed out of need from a natural disaster.

After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, Delilah Valadez and now retired Watsonville Assistant Fire Chief, Don French, who both eventually became the co-founders of Toys for Tots of Santa Cruz County, helped to organize donations of needed supplies after the earthquake. Soon, donations of toys began to roll in just in time for Christmas.

"Stuff just kept coming to town," Valadez, who also holds the position of program coordinator for the charity, said. "Blankets, tents, coats, food and water started showing up by the truckload. One of the things that started coming to us a month later were toys at the local fire departments with no

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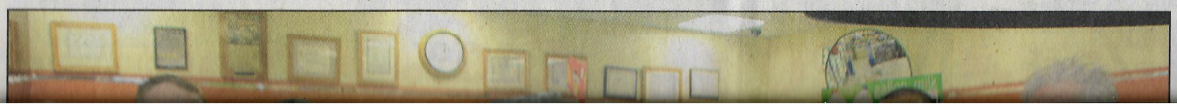
IN A GIVING MOOD



COUNTY

Small

TOYS

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means to get them out. We developed a network of nonprofits already working with displaced and struggling families to get the toys out in a way that was responsible."

As the next year approached it became clear that the need was still there, and the program continued to serve the Pajaro Valley area. The charity grew over time to include all areas of the county.

In the mid-1990s, the group joined up with Toys for Tots and became the only Marine Corps Toys for Tots program in Santa Cruz County, continuing to serve all those in need across the entire county.

Getting the toys ready for distribution takes many volunteers to sort, assemble and bundle toys before they're ready to go to the nonprofit agencies that will give them out to the families in time for Christmas.

"It's like the North Pole," Valadez said. "There are Christmas carols, Martinelli's cider, people are humming and happy to be here. A lot of the volunteers have been coming here for a long time and it has become their tradition. I've seen little kids grow up. It's been a privilege to be a part of this. I've been doing this for 26 years, I'm happy."

One hundred percent of donations received by Toys for Tots in this county remain local. Last year, more than 9,700 toys were donated and given to more than 4,000 local children.

Toys are collected at participating fire stations, businesses and other drop-off sites as well as several community events that are on the calendar for December.

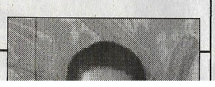
"It is really gratifying to see how much support there is in Santa Cruz County, not just for our program, but also for the local food banks," Valadez said.

Volunteers are always needed, as well as donations of new and unwrapped toys, books (bilingual, too), art supplies, bikes, batteries and more. They also welcome monetary donations. They ask that people avoid donating toys of aggression, unpackaged stuffed animals or items that contain food.

Families in need can contact the Santa Cruz Community Food Hotline (sponsored by the Second Harvest Food Bank) at 662-0091 for a referral to a local agency that will be distributing toys.

For a list of events and participating fire stations and other drop off locations, as well as a list of volunteer opportunities, or if you'd like to host a drop off location, visit the Toys for Tots website at santacruzcounty.toysfortots.org.

Student of the Week

Pajaro Valley Unified School District Student of the Week

McDonald's joins the Pajaro Valley Unified School District and the Register-Pajaronian in recognizing this week's student of the week: