

Lebanon inmates spearhead Toys for Tots collection

By Justin McClelland, Staff Writer

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TURTLECREEK TWP. — Life isn't always easy for Dan Rigney, but as he surveyed the tables filled with action figures, dolls, and toy cars, he couldn't help but smile.

"It's hard to find good coming out of prison" said Rigney, who is an inmate at the Lebanon Correctional Institute. "It's a privilege for us to be a part of this."

On Wednesday, Dec. 16, Fowler and two dozen other inmates beamed with pride as they donated more than \$7,500 worth of toys to the Toys for Tots program of Warren and Butler County. Toys for Tots provides toys to needy children during the holiday season.

The inmates raised the yeoman's share of the donation by bringing in \$7,000 through a variety of fundraisers, including special food drives and collections. The fundraising was conducted through a joint effort of LCI's Vietnam Veteran's Association, African Cultural Organization, and CPR classes. Guard and LCI staff also donated to the program.

"I can't be surprised anymore," said Warden Tim Brunzman about the Herculean effort. "We do a lot of charity events here and the inmates always pull together to support it. They understand the importance of giving back to the community that sooner or later they will be a part of again."

"Raising the money gives us a fulfillment," said Owen Hobbs, the president of the VVA. "It's an important part of paying back our debt to society."

Once the inmates had collected the money, staff from LCI volunteered to purchase the toys, which were stockpiled in the VVA's meeting room until representatives from Toys For Tots could pick them up. When all the money was spent, 68 boxes filled three flatbed dollies, filled with hundreds of toys.

"It was rewarding but challenging to the staff," Brunzman said. "It can be harder than you imagine spending money."

Brunzman said his staff became serious bargain hunters as they worked for ways to stretch the bounty even further.

Jonathan Herald, a representative from Toys For Tots said the bi-county organization had more than 8,000 families ask for help in 2009, even as donations lagged because of the difficult economy.

"These will go a long way to helping," Herald said as he surveyed the toys. The inmates playfully pointed out one toy in particular — a remote controlled police car.

This was the second year the inmates had raised money for Toys for Tots. Last year, they raised \$6,200.

"We'll do it again next year and top ourselves again," Hobbs said.

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