



By Toni Garrard Clay

Santa's Helpers Wear Fire Suits

For more than 20 years, every December, the men of the Athens Fire Department have traded their helmets for Santa hats. Well, symbolically at least. Since the Toys for Tots program was launched in the 1980s, thousands of children have received Christmas gifts who otherwise might not have.

"It's a great feeling to be able to help people who are less fortunate and make sure children don't go without," said Lance West, the Athens Fire Department's Toys for Tots coordinator.

According to West, the department handed out toys for well over 600 kids last year. But, he adds, "Collections have gotten a little low over the last few years, probably because of the economy." He hopes to see a surge in giving this December as Christmas nears, although the department collects toys year-round.

The firefighters rely on the Henderson County HELP Center to screen applications for the Toys for Tots program. After the hardworking staff at the HELP Center screens applicants (which will likely have been completed by the time of this publication), the fire department is given a list of qualified recipients, who are assigned times to pick up gifts from the City

of Athens Training Center near the Central Fire Station on Prairieville Street. The distribution of toys this year is slated for Dec. 19-21. So toys should be dropped off a few days in advance.

"We want the parents to come pick up the presents, take them home and wrap them so they can be given to the children Christmas morning," said West. "We prefer the kids not be at the pick-up. We want them to be surprised by the gifts Christmas morning."

The Athens Fire Department distributes toys for qualified children, ages 3-12, in Athens and the eastern part of the county, which includes Brownsboro, Chandler, LaRue, Moore Station, Murchison and Poynor.

Children in need of toys in the western part of Henderson County around the Cedar Creek Lake area fall under the auspices of KCKL radio. For nearly 30 years,



the station has served lake-area children through the Make a Smile Happen (MASH) Toy Drive.

“We help around 500 children each year,” said Nancy Morrish, business manager for the station. “It’s very important to us. We’re happy to be able to support the community in this way.”

West said the Athens Fire Department’s Toys for Tots program is intended to help people “who’ve had a bad year.”

“We want to help people who have fallen on hard times, such as someone who got laid off and doesn’t have enough money for gifts,” explained West. With that in mind, the fire department established a new guideline this year that a family may not participate in the program more than two consecutive years.

“We want to help those in need,” said West. “We also want to be fair and just for everybody.”

West said the 27 members of the Athens Fire Department feel very strongly about the importance of giving back to the community.

“The taxpayers make it possible for us to be here,” he said. “We want to be there to protect people when they need us, and we want to be out in the community helping even when it’s not an emergency. Toys for Tots is one way we do that.”



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— Athens Firefighter Lance West



To contribute to Toys for Tots, take new, unwrapped gifts, suitable for ages 3-12, to the Central Fire Station at 610 S. Prairieville Street in Athens. Drop-off boxes can also be found at places such as Texas Trust, Bacon Chevrolet, Rounders, Kens and Mazzio’s restaurants, all TVCC home basketball games and the Home for the Holidays event Dec. 8 at the Cain Center.

To contribute to KCKL’s MASH Toy Drive, take unwrapped gifts by the station located in Malakoff at 11125 Hwy. 31 East.



Athens Fire Department Firefighters (from left) Scott Dodgen, Roy Almond and Lance West.

