

Helping hands abound at FHSU

John Dewey once said that “democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” Fort Hays State University embraces this sentiment through its long-standing commitment to civic engagement in our local community, region, state – and even across the globe.

In fact, I will be bold and claim bragging rights on this – thanks to the fortitude of many too numerous to mention. This commitment shows up in an abundance of ways.

Accounting students offer free income tax preparation. Students studying communication sciences and disorders offer free hearing screening clinics. Leadership 310 students design local community projects of their choice in conjunction with an existing organization. Course activities include recognizing a community problem, working with other concerned citizens to develop a plan of action and implementing that plan. One such project is our beautiful downtown pavilion.

Our Foster Grandparent Program connects volunteers 55 and over with children with special or exceptional needs. Our Senior Companion Program connects volunteers of the same age with adults needing support to remain independent. These few examples do not even scratch the surface of our commitment to doing good and serving others.

As I reflect upon how proud I am of the deep impact made by our students, faculty, staff and alumni, I think of one service project in particular that warms my heart every December. Teaming Up for Tots (TUFT) is the yearly construction and assembly project of wooden toys that are given to local children who otherwise might not receive a Christmas gift.

Dr. Duane Renfrow, associate professor of applied technology, explained to me how this all got started.

“Making Christmas toys for the TUFT organization was the brainchild of former Applied Technology chair, Dr. Fred Ruda, in 1990. For the past 31 years, in partnership with the Ellis County community, the Department of Applied Technology has designed and built up to 250 wooden toys each year. These toys are given to local children – through TUFT,” Renfrow said. “A variety of toys have been built through the years, including: jeeps, bug boxes, helicopters, cameras, excavators, pickups, fire trucks, piggy banks, race cars and dump trucks, to name a few. With the untimely passing of Dr. Ruda in 2012, the department decided to name the activity in his honor and call it the Dr. Fred P. Ruda TUFT Day.”

From 1990 through 1997, Ruda was in charge of organizing this event with the help of the department’s Technology Education Collegiate Association (TECA) members. In 1998, Renfrow was tasked with this activity and has been responsible for the development of 18 of the 31 toys.

After taking over the event, Renfrow procured the opportunity to engage students in the fundamentals of TUFT. Weeks – and even months – before the public assembly day, Renfrow formulates the parameters of the toy to be built. Students from Renfrow’s Materials, Processes and Production class research toy designs and bring their ideas to class for a brainstorming session. Several designs are chosen, and prototypes are made. Once the toy design is decided

upon, the manufacturing process is developed, jigs and fixtures are built, and materials are pre-processed.

On assembly day, the university and community are invited to come help. In the early years in Davis Hall, there were typically about 30 people involved on assembly day. Since the department moved to the Center for Applied Technology, 125 to 130 people have attended. The variety of people who show up to help include alumni of the department, university staff and faculty and community folks ranging in age from 5-year-old youngsters to men in their 80s – and all age groups in between. Eighty-three-year-old Don Barton, a retired FHSU employee, has only missed one year of toy building. That's 30 years of dedication to Teaming Up For Tots!

Jobs on the assembly day include sanding, gluing, running parts from station to station, attaching wheels, assembling parts and finishing. Some who have experience even get to operate some of the machines.

This activity is much bigger than just making toys. In addition to demonstrating support for local children, this activity unites the community, as businesses and individuals make donations and volunteer time to make a difference in the lives of others.

Unfortunately, with our current health concerns looming because of the pandemic, this year prevented the “open-to-the-public event.” But have no fear, like many other FHSU activities, the event, though reimaged, still resulted in 150 little pickup trucks for the TUFT organization!

Thank you, Applied Technology faculty and students for bringing joy to little children on Christmas morning – and for setting another example of how Fort Hays State University consistently demonstrates the inspiring ways we enrich our communities.

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CUTLINE: In this 2006 photo at the Teaming Up for Tots event at Fort Hays State University, Dr. Fred Ruda gets help from his grandson, 5-year-old Keith Millershaski, in dipping the front-end loaders into a container of Danish oil.