



### Top Story

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## Santa hands out toys from his “Happy Factory”

By Lailani Upham

BLO — Santa took a little time off from the ruckus at the North Pole to visit kids of all ages in Flathead at the CSKT old tribal complex last week. With a generous support from the National Relief Charities and The Happy Factory, Santa and one of his elves handed out goodie gift bags for infants to adults.



CSKT Headstart student Zoran Lafromboise hauls a gigantic stocking of goodies he received after giving Santa his list of wishes at the DHRD “Pictures with Santa” last Thursday. (Lailani Upham photo)

Tons of homemade cookies were donated from tribal employees and the Kicking Horse chef students for the two-day Santa visit.

Over 650 people walked away with a gift bag during the fifth annual DHRD Santa visit event. All thirteen CSKT Head Start classes, including hundreds of children throughout the community, had a framed photo taken with Santa for free.

The Happy Factory began as a workshop in Charles and Donna Cooley’s home in 1995 near Cedar City, Iowa. The Cooley’s became aware of children who have never had a toy and decided to build toys. “We may not be able to make a toy for every child in the world that needs one, but we’re going to try,” said Cooley.

Charles Cooley was curious of whether or not having a toy made a big difference in a child’s life and pitched the question to friend, Les Jones, Director at the Southern Utah University psychology department.

According to Jones, ‘Children that experience emotional trauma often learn to suppress their pain and fear by turning off their minds. They learn to stop thinking. The common sights and sounds of their world stimulate images of despair. The important elements of their life are beyond their control. They have no power. They learn that they are helpless. They learn to turn off their imagination and escape into a stupor of nothingness. Toys stimulate a sense of power.’

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“The best toys are toys that represent love; personal toys not community toys; simple toys that stimulate the imagination,”



Isabella Devereaux, 4, plays in the rain outside the old tribal complex with a Happy Factory toy car during her mother's errand and appointment runs this week. Happy Factory donated 900 cars to the Tribes for Christmas this summer. (Lailani Upham photo)

Jones added.

It is the first year the volunteer factory donated toys to the Flathead Reservation. The idea of the donation came this summer when the couple decided to come into the Tribal Office looking for Head Start programs this summer during their vacation. “We believe in the Head Start program and so we told each other let's go over to that little town and ask,” Cooley said. According to Cooley, she and her husband came across Sylvia Aimsback, DHRD Store Coordinator, working on the Christmas program with a very small budget. “When we found that out, we told Sylvia let us

give you the toys,” Cooley said. The Happy Factory donated 900 cars for the tribal Santa give-away.

“We don't have money, but believe our success is because the vision was divinely inspired. We have a staff of volunteers that help make us make the toys now. We live in a mobile home and started it all in our house,” Cooley said. “We love Native American people and happy we met Sylvia so we can have a chance to gift toys to the children.”

The Happy Factory has volunteers of every age including juvenile offenders in three state correctional facilities. There are no paid salaries. The Happy Factory is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

Another nonprofit organization, the National Relief Charities (NRC) has been a consistent relief for the CSKT DHRD program throughout the years. NRC's mission is to bring a higher quality of life to Natives living on reservations in the Plains and Southwest.

NRC has served Native communities for 20 years and the only charity to work on over 75 reservations year-round. NRC considers their organization more of a partnership than a charity with a network of nearly 900 partnerships with reservation programs. NRC works through the partners to bring needed relief to over 300,000 reservation communities.

NRC donated hundreds of stuffed stockings full of candy and toys for the Flathead Head Start classes, along with the hygiene bags for the adults.

“The Happy Factory” name came because of the happiness it brings to volunteers and the children who receive the wooden toys. In the midst of their effort, the Cooley’s have learned that toys are not simply playthings, but tools that help unlock a child’s ability to think. “We thank the lord that we have been given the

opportunity to give many children that flower for the soul, to help jump start their imagination to give them a feeling of power and control, to let them feel the love of another human hand,” said Cooley.

The DHRD office will be open Monday, December 21, through Wednesday, December 23, from 7 am -5:30 pm for families to pick up photos.

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