

Christmas in July

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Mike Howard drives through the "hollers" of Harlan County, Ky., looking for children in need. They're not difficult to spot.

"When I come up to a house that looks like a barn and find kids that are ragged and barefoot, I put it on my list," he said.

Howard, 55, has been keeping track of the addresses of needy children for 32 years. He uses that list, which has grown longer every year, to provide for the children at Christmas. This habit has earned Howard the nickname of Mountain Santa. His workshop is a concrete block warehouse where he stores toys, bikes and other gifts until Christmas nears.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE HOWARD

Mike Howard has outgrown his workshop in Harlan County. The Mountain Santa patiently trusts that God will provide a larger building for his ministry to children in the area.

"People call me Santa Claus that don't even know my name," he said.

Every child in need gets a present and a treat bag filled with nutritious food to eat, whether they've been naughty or nice.

Although there are more children to care for than ever before, Howard never worries. He knows the Lord will provide because He has been since the beginning. "You just go in the mountains and pray, and then you stand back and watch what the Lord does," he said. "The Lord amazes me."

Howard delivers to thousands of children at more than 1,000 addresses each year. He doesn't ask people for help, but people help him all the time.

"I pray, and the Lord moves on people's hearts. Once you do it, you're hooked to it," he said. "When you pull up to a place, and kids come out barefooted ... all you can do is look and cry." John and Wanda Noland know the feeling. The Southeast members are part of the Sojourners Weekend Group that meets on Sunday mornings. John saw an article about Mountain Santa in The Courier-Journal, and he and Wanda decided they wanted to do something to contribute.

They enlisted the help of fellow Sojourners, and the group has been collecting and delivering presents to Howard for 10 years. They are one of many groups across the South and the Midwest that aid in the effort.

Gary and Marlene Hale recently held the class' annual Christmas in July party, where members and their friends bring gifts wrapped in Christmas paper to put under the Christmas tree. "This is what it's all about," said Marlene as more guests arrived and made their way to the tree.

The gifts collected that day, as well as others that are donated throughout the year, are stored in the Nolands' garage until after Thanksgiving when the Sojourners load them onto a truck to make a delivery to Howard.

"Every year the truck gets bigger," Wanda said.

Class member Gary White helps load the trucks in Louisville and has traveled to Harlan County to help Howard distribute the gifts.

"The kids don't get anything if he doesn't come," Gary said.

FAITH THAT MOVES MOUNTAINS

Howard now drives the mountain terrain in a 2006 Ford Ranger—another prayer answered. "I prayed for three months for the Lord to move on somebody to buy me a truck or give me a truck," he said. "A man from Louisville drove a truck in and gave me \$800 to pay the taxes on it. I tell people when the Lord does something, He does it good."

Sojourner Rachel Brown wants to have the kind of faith that Howard has.

"I'm always amazed when someone has that level of faith," said Brown, who does have a measure of it.

She attended a health fair recently where a drawing was held for a child's bicycle. Not needing one for herself, she said she registered to win it for Mountain Santa.

A few days later, she received a call that informed her she had won the drawing.

Howard said he was 17 years old when the Lord started dealing with his heart.

Soon after, he turned 18 and began praying and drawing close to God. He's been serving Him ever since.

Just last week, Howard started praying for a building, since he's outgrown his workshop and has to string up the weather-resistant toys around the outside of the building.

His neighbor lets him keep the bicycles in a barn that houses horses, but it's always a muddy trek in the winter to take the toys from the barn to the trucks.

"I'm going to build and not have to take them nowhere," Howard said. "I'm looking and awaiting. The Lord says for you to have patience, and I've got lots of it."

Howard's specific need is for a 24 by 60 tin building that he can erect on his property.

MEETING NEEDS

Howard is well-known throughout Harlan County, not only as Mountain Santa, but as the man who brings milkshakes and treats to elderly people who live in nursing homes. One receives tomato juice and a jar of pickles because she can't have the sugar.

The money to pay for these items comes in from people who see Howard in the supermarket or around town every week.

He just asks the Lord to provide so he can continue his ministry to people.

"He's never failed me," Howard said.

Mountain Santa also makes weekly visits to the Harlan County Jail.

"He's working for the Lord every day when he gets up," John said.

The Southeast member said he was drawn to Howard's ministry because there are no organizations large enough to make an impact for the poor in the area.

"There are no Angel Trees down there and no churches our size to support this," he said.

Alcoholism and drug addiction run rampant in the mountains of Harlan County, which is located in southeast Kentucky. Howard said he's stepped over many a dad or mom who was passed out on the floor.

"It's not the kids' fault," he said. "That's why it hurts so bad. You cry, and then you run into another family that's the same way."

The first year Howard went out on his Christmas run, he delivered a truckload of gifts on Christmas Eve.

About two years later, he became disabled from a coal mining accident and began working on his ministry full time.

WORKLOAD INCREASES WITH NEED

Last year, Mountain Santa delivered 115 different sized truckloads of gifts and anticipates that more will go out this year. In addition to presents, volunteers put together more than 3,500 treat bags. To fill them, Howard buys 14,000 Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, 7,000 oranges, 7,000 apples, 20,000 packages of bubble gum, 14,000 bags of chips and 25,000 lollipops.

He starts delivering about two weeks before Christmas and finishes on Christmas Eve.

Last year, Noland delivered 98 brand new bicycles—30 of which the Sojourners collected.

Howard said in addition to the bikes, the class donated \$2,500 worth of new toys. During the Christmas in July party, more than \$1,500 was collected for his ministry.

Volunteers spend hours every Christmas season wrapping presents. As many as 20 at a time come for several hours whenever a new load of toys comes in.

During this busy time, the Howards live on bologna sandwiches and hamburgers.

"We don't have time to cook," he said.

His wife Barbara is always by his side to help him with every endeavor. The couple leaves one truckload of gifts behind, which helps meet needs of local children whose parents call asking him for help.

The Sojourners plan to continue their yearly trek to Harlan County.

"We enjoy the giving, and the kids enjoy the getting, so everybody wins," John said. People that Howard helped 32 years ago now are buying toys for Howard to give to other children. They tell him that if it weren't for him, they wouldn't have had Christmas.

Stories like this fuel Howard's passion for his ministry even more, and he has no plans to retire.

"I'm gonna do it until I pass away," he said.