TOYS + JOYS + TEAMWORK + COMMUNITY = RESULTS

Another season of giving shows off the heart of PF&R’s history...and its future

Nowhere on the Coggle will you see Toy & Joy Makers as an action item. But just like there are actions categorized as being in the spirit of Christmas, so, too, are those things that can be considered in the spirit of the Coggle.

Eddie Boatright (front, in Class-A uniform) and Portland firefighters display toys to be fixed in 1929.

Lt Pat McMahon and FF Tommy Dang bring the joy.

Many of us at PF&R know the roots of the Toy & Joy Makers program, our affiliated non-profit that provides toys to children in need during the holidays and beyond.

The story goes like this: In 1914, a neighborhood child brought a broken wagon into their local fire house (Station 20) and asked Firefighter Eddie Boatright and crew to fix it. They mended it and then word moved quickly around the neighborhood that their local fire station was the place to go to get toys patched up. Soon, kids who didn’t get new toys for the holidays were carting in their broken toys to be brought back to life.

By 1924, what started as a single act of kindness blossomed into an organized effort by firefighters to supply area children in need with working toys. And that effort has been going strong ever since.

“How those crews responded around the turn of last century is exactly what I’m asking of every station,” says Fire Chief Mike Myers. “With our upcoming FMA blueprint project, stations will be assessing what the needs are in their neighborhoods and then they will come up with plans to address them efficiently, professionally, and with heart. Just like Eddie Boatright and the firefighters of that era did.”

Though the focus of the program – supplying toys to children in need – has remained the same for over 100 years, how it meets that goal has changed dramatically over the years. For a long stretch, firefighters repaired broken toys at engine houses that each had certain specialties (bikes at one station, dolls at another, etc...), but the current iteration traffics in new toys that are processed at a warehouse owned by PF&R in Northeast Portland.

The whole organization is overseen by everyone’s favorite elf (retired firefighter Dean Johnston, Toy & Joy’s president) with help from a sworn PF&R firefighter in a liaison role (Lt. Pat McMahon is finishing his last year in a six-year stint.) As the season ramps up, the warehouse is bustling. Johnston makes his endless wisecracks, PF&R retirees from the volunteer team talk about the old days while expertly filling toy boxes, station crews who are assigned slots by the liaison load and unload trucks. On a recent visit, this Cogglevation reporter just missed the annual breakfast that the Klum family cooks up for the volunteers.

As Lt. McMahon noted in his thank you letter after Christmas, fire crews are the face of Toy & Joy and they accept their assignments readily. Of note are the number of hours that active Portland firefighters volunteer when they are off duty. Lt. McMahon offered special praise for Firefighters Tommy Dang and Dave Swanson, who have given hundreds of hours of volunteer time to the cause. FF Dang has found a special niche at Toy & Joy. Since he used to work at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) before he became a firefighter, he has helped streamline how this group (which has a high need for donations) requests and receives their toys.

And while FF Dang talks about the many reasons he enjoys volunteering his free hours with Toy & Joy (he loves learning from retirees about their work in the fire service), there is a more personal purpose. “When my family came here from Vietnam, we needed assistance,” he says. “We had very little and I was brought as a child to a similar organization to pick out a toy. I remember how much joy it brought me, getting that toy. That’s one of the reasons I’m passionate about this work and I always want to give back to the community.”

That, folks, is the spirit of Christmas AND the Coggle!