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Woodworkers aim to build smiles

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Cigar box guitars made by the Golden Isles Woodworkers and Woodturners club are displayed in an undated photo. The group made 36 guitars which will be donated to children undergoing critical medical care.

A group of area woodworkers and artists are aiming to carve out some good will this holiday season using some unlikely materials.

The Golden Isles Woodworkers and Woodturners group is partnering with a leading manufacturer of wood ceilings, Florida-based Rulon International, to turn scrap wood from production lines into unique giveaway guitars for critically ill youngsters in hospitals and cancer camps across the country and

abroad.

“The guitars are in different shapes and forms and so on,” said Karen Grogan, the woodworking group’s vice president. “(Rulon) makes the kits, and they sent them to us. We assembled them, and had them painted, and then we’ll donate them.”

So far, the group has made 36 of the so-called “cigar box guitars,” and they’re planning to hand deliver them to Rulon’s headquarters in St. Augustine on Tuesday, Grogan said.

From there, Rulon representatives work with hospitals and pediatric-treatment organizations to get the brightly painted instruments into the hands of children battling serious ailments.

“The most enjoyable part was seeing how beautiful they came back after painting,” Grogan said. “They’re so unique and different.”

About 10 of the club’s 29 members helped make the guitars, all of which are distinctive in their shape and design. Each member had different skills to contribute, Grogan said, and the result was an “assembly line” style fabrication process.

“I assembled several guitars and painted them,” Grogan said. “I did everything but the wires. I thought that should be done by someone who knew more about guitars. I helped install the key assembly and put the dowels on.”

Another group member — a local school band teacher — helped put the strings on the guitars and another member, club president Larry Sullivan, lent a hand attaching the necks.

“It is so amazing,” Sullivan said. “When I was growing up, my dad was a guitar player. The guitar has been a part of my life. It meant a lot to help do that, where there are certain people who did certain jobs, like painting them or building them. It was a great feeling to see everyone working as a club, so that one person isn’t doing all the work.”

And the club even reached beyond its membership rolls to enlist help fashioning the funky freebies. Pa Weaver, a friend of Grogan’s and a local artist who paints furniture, offered her skills.

“I think it was a great idea, and I’m glad our woodworkers decided to participate in it,” Weaver said. “I liked the fact that it’s all volunteer, and (the guitars go) all across the country. (Rulon is) doing several

thousand of them. It's just the kind of program that you want to participate in."

Weaver also said she hopes each guitar has not only its own special sound, but a peculiar flair that fits each child recipient.

In painting the guitars, Weaver said she "wanted to make it exciting for each child, so that whoever gets it, it's personal to him or her."

When the cigar-box guitars are delivered, a lettering sticker kit is also included for children to add their name to the instrument, according to Rulon's website.

So far, the company has delivered 1,300 cigar-box guitars to children, according to Tim Tyler, a Rulon inventory and materials manager who coordinates the guitar giveaways.

"This summer was huge for us," Tyler said. "We probably did about 300 or better guitars over the summer alone."

Although the guitars primarily go to hospitals and children's cancer clinics, some end up in orphanages, even in places as far away as Haiti, Tyler said.

"We sent 200 to an orphanage in Haiti," said Tyler. "Those kids got 45 of their own, and then the kids in the orphanage also took the rest to the kids in the local hospital."

Tyler said he's proud of his company's ability to take what would be wasted material, and turn it into something that brings smiles to the faces of children in need.

"Rulon is a Christian-based company, and our two owners believe in giving back," he said. "About half of the materials used in the kits are scrap materials. We have multiple different designs with different depths, so sometimes there is excess, or we have defects. We take that material and put it into the guitars, and we also work with our suppliers to buy plywood."

Tyler said anyone who wants to become involved in the guitar-building program can contact Rulon toll free at 800-227-8566 and ask to speak with him.

"We need all types of volunteers, all the way down to building, distributing and painting," he said.

Tyler Jones