



Toy loans teaching kids integrity

By Dennis McCarthy, Columnist

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The dozen kids with the wide eyes and excited smiles on their faces Monday morning had no idea who they should thank for the new toys they were getting a chance to take home and play with for a couple of weeks.

Toys their parents living in the low-income apartment houses around North Valley Caring Services in North Hills couldn't buy them.

Ironically, the kids could start by thanking a couple of boys caught shoplifting in the summer of 1934 during the Great Depression.

That's how the Los Angeles County Toy Loan Program - one of those small government programs that works so well nobody knows about it - began nearly 75 years ago.

Thanks to a couple of young shoplifters.

The manager of a five-and-dime store in Southwest Los Angeles caught the boys pocketing small toys and materials to build their own toys.

They were taken to Probation Department officials who called their school principal and

found the boys were making good marks in school, but their families could not afford luxuries like toys.

The store manager, school principal and Probation Department staff came up with the idea of gathering toys and loaning them to children to prevent them from becoming delinquents.

"The first toy loan center opened in a garage near Manchester Park, and the toys were loaned on a weekly basis with a record kept of every toy borrowed," said Marcia Benitez, director of the county Toy Loan Program.

The children were graded on the care of their borrowed toy, and after 20 good marks became honor borrowers.

"They were trying to teach the kids honesty, responsibility, courtesy and integrity, and nothing's changed today," Benitez said. "We still are."

Every year, 30,000 kids from low-income families borrow more than 45,000 new and used toys from 48 loan centers spread throughout the county.

"We look for pockets of the county where kids would use the loan program because they wouldn't be getting the chance to play with these toys any other way," Benitez said.

The centers are located in parks and recreation facilities, children's centers, libraries, housing

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projects and community services buildings.

The newest one opens at North Valley Caring Services this week, with another center opening in Pacoima next month.

"All the kids have talked about for the last month is when will the toys get here," said Erik Duran, director of the after-school program at the nonprofit facility.

His program is one of many social and educational programs offered at the center. While the children attend the after-school program, their parents take ESL and mothering classes next door.

"I've never seen the kids as excited about anything as getting to take these toys home and play with them," Duran said. "It's a definite plus for all the kids in our community."

If the toys don't come back, well, they don't come back, Benitez said.

"We'll replenish the centers because we want as many children to have access to these toys as possible," she said, adding that almost all the toys come back in good shape.

"Our program doesn't get a lot of exposure, but it's helped thousands of kids in this county learn about honesty and responsibility over the years."

Thanks to a couple of kids caught shoplifting during the Great Depression.

For more information on the toy loan program or to donate used and new toys to centers, call 213-744-4344, or go to www.ladpss.org/dpss/toyloan/default.cfm.

Dennis McCarthy's column appears Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. dennis.mccarthy@dailynews.com, 818-713-3749

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