

Island of RePlay toys, Ashland High School students adapt toys for kids with special needs

By MIKE BUETTNER T-G Staff Writer Published: November 7, 2016 4:00 AM



Natalie Wardega, standing, director of operations with RePlay for Kids, helps Ashland High School National Honor Society students, from left, Hannah Donofrio and Megan Icenhour, and parent mentor Patty Hart during a toy workshop Saturday at the school cafeteria. (Times-Gazette photo/Mike Buettner)

No elves were in sight but the cafeteria at Ashland High School still resembled Santa's workshop Saturday morning.

Nine students from the school's National Honor Society -- seniors Hannah Donofrio and Tyler Townsend, and juniors Megan Icenhour, Anne Fink, Sarah Hildebrand, Nikki Schuster, Emma Jenkins, Maddy Lewis and Hannah Donley -- gathered for a two-hour RePlay for Kids workshop, modifying 40 battery-operated toys for students with disabilities.

"They're adapting them so children with disabilities can activate the toys," said Natalie Wardega, director of operations for RePlay for Kids. "This is our STEM workshop, teaching kids about electrical engineering and how to solder. And then the toys will be used in the community with kids."

RePlay for Kids is a nonprofit organization based in Medina that repairs and adapts toys and assistive devices for children with disabilities in northeast Ohio. RePlay's mission is to increase the availability of those toys and devices for children with disabilities, and to raise awareness and increase the number and variety of toys and devices available to the children who need them.

Wardega and RePlay intern Luis Rimmel led the students on a step-by-step process, beginning with removing the toys from their boxes. Wardega then explained how to find the switch on the remote control cars, musical toys, teddy bears and robots, and how to attach a longer wire cable to the toy using solder and a soldering iron.

Once adapted with the wire and an attached jack, a variety of alternative switches or buttons can be plugged in so children with a lower level of dexterity or muscle control can control them.

Patty Hart, a parent mentor at Ashland High School, said the National Honor Society students were chosen for the initial workshop at the school because they have a community service

requirement. The long-term goal is to get other students involved as well. "We hope they learn how to rewire the toys and spark an interest in engineering and later also learn how to do this so they can teach other kids during Lunch Bunch or after-school programs and get even more kids involved," Hart said.

Grants from **Ashland County Community Foundation** (\$860) and Ashland Family and Children First Council (\$478) provided the funding to purchase the toys and supplies for the workshop. "They purchased the kits so the kids can adapt the toys throughout the year at their convenience," Wardega said.

Wardega explained that the RePlay organization was started by Bill Memberg, a medical engineer at Case Western Reserve University. While doing graduate work in 1989, Memberg saw an ad from the Cuyahoga Board of Developmental Disabilities asking if anyone could fix broken toys. After fixing a couple boxes of toys, his friends joined in.

Ten years later, Memberg formed RePlay for Kids to provide workshops for repairing or adapting battery-operated toys. RePlay started its workshop program with two or three events in 1999. Wardega said RePlay hopes to cooperate in 134 workshops this year and also eventually wants to do monthly or quarterly workshops at Ashland University.

Its annual report for 2015 shows RePlay for Kids has had 411 workshops in the past nine years, repairing or adapting 7,687 toys at a savings of more than \$472,000 to the agencies it helps. RePlay workshops repaired or adapted 1,636 toys in 2015 alone.

The toys that are adapted start as typical toys with a price tag of between \$10 and \$20. The supplies to modify them add about another \$10. That's quite a savings from the \$65 or more for adapted toys on the market, Wardega said.

All the toys from workshops throughout the year are distributed to agencies -- now numbering 42 in 11 counties -- in December, this year Dec. 1. Participating agencies come to Medina and pick out the toys they need. They are then used for physical therapy by disabled children in the area.

"The teachers that work with the kids in occupational therapy and physical therapy will be invited to the warehouse to pick out five toys for each child in the district that will be used in the classroom," Hart said. "And (the kids) might get one toy that they can take home with them." "Either way, they stay in the community," Wardega said. "They pick out toys and take them back ... and give to families or keep in their facilities for multiple children."

Fink, who has attended an engineering camp at University of Akron and is interested in studying chemical engineering for cosmetics in college, said she was happy to gain knowledge from the workshop. "And I hope it inspires other people to get out and do something for the community, too," she said. "It's important for the National Honor Society to spread what we do."

Anyone interested in more information about RePlay for Kids or its workshops can go to the website, www.replayforkids.org.