

Origin and Evolution of Toys for Tots



Toys for Tots began in 1947 when Major Bill Hendricks, USMCR, and a group of Marine Reservists in Los Angeles collected and distributed 5,000 toys to needy children. The idea came from Bill's wife, Diane. In the fall of 1947, Diane crafted a homemade doll and asked Bill to deliver the doll to an organization that would give it to a needy child at Christmas. When Bill determined that no agency existed, Diane told Bill that he should start one. He did. The 1947 pilot project was so successful that the Marine Corps adopted Toys for Tots in 1948 and expanded it into a nationwide campaign. That year, Marine Corps Reserve Units across the nation conducted Toys for Tots campaigns in each community in which a Marine Corps Reserve unit was located. Marines have conducted successful nationwide campaigns every year since 1948. The initial objective that remains the hallmark of the program to this day is to "bring joy of Christmas to America's needy children."

Bill Hendricks, a Marine Reservist on weekends, was in civilian life, the Director of Public Relations for Warner Brothers Studio. This enabled him to convince a vast array of celebrities to support Toys for Tots. In 1948, Walt Disney designed the Toys for Tots logo which is still used today. Disney also designed the first Toys for Tots poster used to promote the nationwide program. Celebrities of each era have been big supporters of the program.

From 1947 through 1979, Marine collected and distributed new and used toys. On Reserve drill weekends during October, November and December, Reserve Marines refurbished new toys. From Christmas 1980 through the present, Marines have collected and distributed only new toys. The change was the result of greater use of the all-volunteer Reserve force; greater public awareness of the health and safety aspects of toys developed during the 1970's legally inadvisable; and the potential stigma associated with "hand me down" toys was a message the Marines did not want to send to needy children. The goal is to deliver a message of hope that will assist in building self-esteem, and, in turn, motivate less fortunate children to grow into responsible, productive, patriotic citizens and community leaders. A shiny new toy is a means of accomplishing this goal.

In the late 1980s, the Marine Corps determined that a non-profit charity was needed as an integral part of the overall national Toys for Tots program. Based on this need, the Secretary of Defense, in August 1991, authorized the Marine Corps to recognize and work with a charity committed to supporting Toys for Tots. Based on this approval, the Marine Toys for Tots Foundation became an operational organization in September 1991 and has been the fundraising and support organization for the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program.

The Foundation was able to satisfy the five needs identified by the Marine Corps:

- Could provide toys to supplement the collections of local units that had fewer Marines due to the military cutbacks of the 1980s and '90s.
- Could arrange and pay for the creation, publication, manufacture and distribution of promotional and support materials for Toys for Tots Coordinators.
- Could enable individual and corporate donors to take charitable deductions on their income tax returns.
- Could enter into contracts with corporations to conduct promotions, which would produce royalties for Toys for Tots.
- Could ensure the Toys for Tots program operates in compliance with IRS regulations, state laws and regulations, and charitable standards.

Of note, needs three and four were two important elements of this charitable endeavor that the Marine Corps, as a federal agency, could not fulfill.

In 1995, the Secretary of Defense approved Toys for Tots as an official activity of the U.S. Marine Corps and an official mission of the Marine Corps Reserve.

In 1996, the Commander, Marine Forces Reserve expanded Toys for Tots to cover all 50 states by authorizing selected Marine Corps League Detachments and selected local community organizations (generally veteran Marine organizations), located in communities without a Marine Corps Reserve Center, to conduct toy collection and distribution campaigns in communities as part of the U.S. Marine Reserve Toys for Tots Program.

In 1999, the Commander, Marine Forces Reserve delegated the authority to the President, Toys for Tots Foundation to approve and manage local Toys for Tots campaigns conducted in communities without a Reserve Unit.

Despite the trauma the nation experienced as a result of the September 11th, 2001 attacks in New York City, Washington, DC and Pennsylvania, the economic downturn and the anthrax scare, the 2001 Toys for Tots Campaign was the second best in the previous 54 year history of the program. Local campaigns were conducted in 388 communities covering all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. This was the most extensive coverage to date.

The Marine Toys for Tots Foundation celebrated its 10th anniversary as a fund raising and support organization for Toys for Tots in 2001. The highlights of the year were that the Foundation had its most successful campaign to date plus was ranked #289 in 2001 "Philanthropy 400" – the first year the Foundation made a ranking in the Chronicle of Philanthropy's annual ranking. In 2002, Charity Navigator awarded the Foundation a 4-star rating and the Chronical of Philanthropy ranked the Foundation #267 in their rankings.

In 2003, the DMA Nonprofit Federation named the Foundation the Foundation the "Outstanding Nonprofit Organization of the Year" for 2003. The Chronicle of Philanthropy ranked the Foundation #341. Starburst ranked the Foundation website #9 of the "Top 100 Toy Websites." In the November 2003 edition of Reader's Digest, the magazine named the Marine Toys for Tots Foundation as "America's Best Children's Charity." And in the December 2003 edition, Forbes included the Marine Toys for Tots Foundation in its "Gold Star List" of charities. From 2004 to the present, the Foundation has continued to receive, on an annual basis, similar accolades.

Since beginning the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Toys for Tots Program in 1947, Marines have distributed more than 452 million toys to more than 209 million needy children. This charitable endeavor has made the U.S. Marines the unchallenged leader in looking after less fortunate children at Christmas. Over its life span, the Marine Toys for Tots Foundation has supplemented local toy collections with more than 98 million toys valued at more than \$694 million; plus provided promotion and support materials valued at over \$8.5 million.

In FY2022, Charity Navigator gave the Marine Toys for Tots Foundation a 4-star / 99% (Great) ranking. Charity Watch also gave the Foundation a Top-Rated Charity/A- rating in December 2021.