



Margaret and Murray with their grand daughter Ella

"The first rocking horse I ever made has come back for repair and a spruce up to be handed on to the next generation. It's now a family heirloom."

Toymaker weaves magic in wood

Every day is Christmas for these toys

The workshop is fragrant with the sweet smell of wood, timber is neatly stacked around the walls and two ante rooms serve as paint rooms and a display room for lovingly crafted toys – perfect presents for boys and girls of all ages. "I tell people, bring me in a rough drawing and I'll make anything you want," says the craftsman.

Could this be Santa's workshop? In a way it is, as children all over the country will squeal with delight on Christmas morning when they unwrap and play with their new wooden toys. Murray Neale has been making toys and other novel woodcraft for 23 years. His toys, cabinets, bookshelves and tables and chairs hold pride of place at many playcentres – "they come up with the ideas and I make them," says Murray – while his dolls' houses are adored by little girls as far away as the South Island, Australia, England and Egypt. Imaginative toys for girls include dolls' prams, cots and highchairs, little ovens and fridges – even toy microwaves. There are trains, diggers, transporters, cranes and trucks for the boys, rocking horses, ride-on ponies, trucks and trains for the littlies. But Murray's creations are not just for the small people – adults come up with requests for him to spin his magic too.

"One woman wanted a dolls' house to use as a display setting for her porcelain dolls. I've made letterboxes in the shape of eskimoes and a John Deere tractor – then there was the order for a full size replica of a guitar – it split down the middle to open up as a photo album. I had to put my thinking cap on for that one."

Christmas is a special time in Murray's workshop. Last year rocking horses were in hot demand. So far, the most popular order this Christmas is for children's tables and chair sets, but anything could happen as the big day comes closer and Murray is ready with a good selection of popular items.

Working with wood is the most natural thing in the world for this cabinet maker and dairy farmer. Murray was raised on his parents' dairy farm at East Tamaki, worked as a carpenter and cabinet maker, then went back to farming at Karaka 38 years ago. His woodworking skills came back into play when he had to give up farming and he and his wife Margaret moved a short distance away to Paerata Road to open up the toy making business. For some time the couple set up stalls at 40-50 craft shows and markets each year, but now customers, attracted by his reputation, come to his workshop "from all-over." Murray works a full day, six days a week, still feeling that passion for crafting wood – pine, macrocarpa and "a bit of rimu. I source wood wherever I can.

"Wooden toys are special, they're made from something natural, are strong and durable and can be repaired – that's the difference between a handcrafted New Zealand toy and toys brought from the other side of the world. The first rocking horse I ever made has come back for repair and a spruce up to be handed on to the next generation. It's now a precious family heirloom.

"Kids are fun – they are our future but too many people are passing up what's best for them with these stupid laws that mean kids can't do anything. We need to get them back to real life, back to real ways to play."

The wall of Murray and Margaret's dining room is covered in plaques – certificates of appreciation for Murray's work during his 36 years as a member of the Pukekohe Lions Club. Among them, the prestigious Melvin Jones Fellowship awarded this year from Lions Club International and an honorary membership of the Lloyd Morgan Lions Club Charitable Trust – plus a letter of thanks from Radio Lollipop at Starship Hospital, for Murray's gift of a giant replica of a radio for their broadcasting room. Children and wooden toys – they just go together naturally.