

Toys made with heart

March 15, 2010

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Give Ousmane Kromah a handful of broken balloons and 10 minutes, and he'll hand you back a rubber ball that will bounce to the ceiling.

The 14-year-old student, who came to Canada in 2004, didn't have money to buy toys growing up in Namibia, Africa. Instead, he put his own hands to work and learned to craft rubber balls from discarded balloons.

They made for a great game of cricket, Kromah explained, as he wound the deflated balloons tightly together into a ball. He learned the art from his older brother and it's a skill he's proud to share. Buying one just wouldn't be the same, he said.

"You made it with a lot of love."

The teen is part of a refugee student program at Kitchener's A.R. Kaufman Public School that is displaying students' hand-crafted toys at Cambridge Galleries during March Break. The show, entitled Toys Are Us, provides insight into the lives of children, many who have spent time living on the streets or in refugee camps. The children have found joy in places others don't bother to look. Many youths today judge their self-worth by the gadgets they buy. These students define themselves by what they can create from society's scraps.

Artist Sandra Phillips, who has worked with the students in the past, received a grant from ArtsSmarts Waterloo Region to help the students create the exhibit.

"These are remarkable children," she said, at the exhibit's opening Friday.

"They all made toys from garbage, from things they just found on the ground."

In this gadget-frenzied world, some children haven't learned how to create their own fun, said Phillips. "In this country, they buy toys, but do they actually make them. And if they buy them, are they really happy with them?"



Toys made with heart. Ousmane Kromah, 14, shows a rubber ball he crafted from deflated balloons. The toy he made while living in Africa is one of many on display at the Cambridge Galleries Toys Are Us exhibit during March Break.

There's no reason to feel sorry for the children who crafted the toys for the exhibit, reminds Phillips. "They all know how to build things and if they break they know how to repair them."

Robert Thody, education officer at the gallery, said it was a honour for the gallery to showcase the students' toys, as their talent gives the community something to think about.

Teacher Kim Cavanaugh, who works with senior-aged children in the program, said the exhibit is an empowering experience for students, who are easily overwhelmed when coming to Canada. "It allows them to be risk takers in a new world," she said.

The Toys Are Us exhibit runs at the Cambridge Galleries, 1 Queen's Square, Monday to Thursday, from 9:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.; Friday, from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday, from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Sunday, from 1 to 5 p.m.