

FOR A VERO BEACH REALTOR CHRISTMAS IS A TIME FOR TRANSFORMATION

**BLYTHE SPIRIT**

BY KRISTINE WOOLLEY



JON PINE

At Riverside Children's Theatre's Festival of Trees in 2003, Santa's presence was enjoyed by Brianna Miller (in Santa's arms) and her sister Annalise.

Standing over six feet tall, with a great belly, full white beard, hearty laugh and twinkling blue-green eyes, 67-year-old George Blythe looks and sounds like Santa Claus without even trying.

Fortunately, George does not let his likeness to St. Nick go to waste. For the past 23 years, he's played Santa Claus for non-profit and community service organizations, hospitals, nursing homes and churches throughout Indian River County.

"The Exchange Club had a Breakfast with Santa Claus event in the early '80s. Somebody grabbed me for it and I've been doing it ever since," he says. "My first Santa gig starts around November 20 with the Festival of Trees at Riverside Children's Theatre. After that, I'm booked solid for a month."

Over the years, hundreds of children have sat on George's lap and asked for a new doll or the latest gadget, but this Santa prefers to engage them in a holiday discussion.

"I work Santa differently than everyone else. My question is not, 'What do you want for Christmas?' It's 'Tell me about Christmas.' I want to get them involved in a conversation. I want to know how they will celebrate Christmas, where they are spending Christmas and how they will decorate the tree. This way, you get the entire family engrossed in the conversation and it's not just about presents – that's not what Christmas is to me."

One thing children are always interested to learn is how Santa manages to get all those presents down to Florida from the North Pole. "I tell them that stacking a sleigh is like loading a car – the last thing you need to take out is the first thing that has to go in. So I tell them I need their list early so there is plenty of time to make the



WHEN YOUNGSTERS REQUEST THE LATEST ELECTRONIC GADGET, GEORGE SAYS HE HAS TO TALK TO HIS BILL GATES OR STEVE JOBS ELVES. "THE PARENTS START TO GIGGLE, BECAUSE I'M REALLY PLAYING SANTA FOR THE PARENT. I GET A GOOD HUG FROM THE KID, BUT I'M THERE TO HELP OUT THE PARENTS," HE SAYS.

presents and let the paint dry before they have to go in the sleigh."

Of course, he says, there are always children who ask Santa for a puppy or kitten. "It's a bad thing to promise kids something when you have no idea if they'll get it. I request they and their parents go to the Humane Society to adopt a pet because I have problems with puppies and kittens getting into tussles on the sleigh. They knock the bicycles around and if they land on a roof, then there's trouble."

When youngsters request the latest electronic gadget, George says he has to talk to his Bill Gates or Steve Jobs elves. "The parents start to giggle, because I'm really playing Santa for the parent. I get a good hug from the kid, but I'm there to help out the parents," he says.

This Santa even goes out of his way to help long-distance relatives. One year a grandmother from Massachusetts called him because she was unable to spend Christmas with her grandchildren. She shipped her presents to George, who delivered them on Christmas morning to her family.

One of his most touching requests came from a little girl whose mother had died. "She said 'I want my mommy back.' It was Downtown Friday and there was all this noise, but this little girl was just snuggled up in my arms. I told her, 'I'll put your mommy in your heart for you and you'll remember that at every Christmas,' he recalls.

Another challenge George faces is being recognized – by both parents and children. "I've been doing this so long that people know who I am when I'm in my street clothes. I was in Blockbuster one Saturday night, the place was full of kids and some guy called me Santa. Another time in Publix a little girl walked past me and said, 'Mommy, I just saw Santa Claus.' I've really gotten over being recognized, but I still never wear red after September."

But the real test George faces is what happens after December 25. "The best part of being Santa is the warmth and naiveté

of the children," he says. "There is total openness and no restraints, but children today are absolutely frightened of everything because their parents are always saying, 'Don't talk to him ... don't take candy from strangers,' so on December 26 I have to quit cold turkey. That's the hardest part of being Santa Claus, because, up until that point, I've been able to hug, squeeze and kiss any child."

Born at a women's medical college in Philadelphia, George was raised in nearby St. David's, where he lived for 43 years and worked in construction. In 1980, he and his wife Patty, a retired surgical assistant, decided to move to Florida with their two youngest daughters, while the two grown daughters stayed behind.

"We had a house in Avalon, New Jersey, and thought it would be nice to live in the sun 12 months out of the year. We drove all over Florida trying to find a town comparable to Avalon and decided there were only two places. One was Sanibel Island and the other was Vero Beach," George explains.

Since Sanibel was four hours from the girls' school, the couple picked Vero Beach. "Vero Beach has been wonderful to us and we've had a good time here," says George, now a Realtor for Curry & Company Real Estate. "I've been in construction and real estate my entire life, so I like it a whole lot. I can choose when I want to work and have the opportunity to work with a lot of nice folks who are coming to Vero Beach to do exactly what we did."

When he's not selling homes or donning his Santa suit, George stays busy serving his third term as vice president of the Exchange Club. He also serves on a growth task force to slow down growth and "keep it the way Vero Beach was in the olden days."

Growing up, Christmas was his favorite holiday because it gave him a chance to visit both sets of grandparents. "One family



GEORGE'S TRANSFORMATION FROM REALTOR TO SANTA CLAUS GETS UNDERWAY IN MID-SUMMER  
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lived in New York City and the other in the Catskill Mountains. It wasn't about the presents, it was about being with family and having new surroundings to explore," he says.

His first time playing Santa dates back nearly 60 years, when he was 10 years old. "I come from a German heritage and we used to open presents on Christmas Eve. There would be a rap on the window and Santa would wave at us to let us know that, if we went to the front door, the packages were there," George says. "One year my family asked me to be Santa, so I put on the mask, knocked on the window and waved to everyone. Then I took the mask off, came through the back door and was inside again by the time we all went to the front door. That was my first Santa gig. I fooled everybody."

George's transformation from Realtor to Santa Claus gets under way in mid-summer when he grows out his beard, which stays shiny and white throughout the season with the help of a special concoction of shoe polish and soap. His

Santa outfit consists of black rubber boots, a red Santa suit with white trim, gloves, a leather hoop with sleigh bells – so that children can hear him coming – and two bags for gifts: a red one "to look cool" and a gray one "to get dirty."

"I started buying my own costume about 10 years ago and I'm on my fourth one," he says. "Two years is about all you get out of them. I generally wear out the fanny first from sitting on different things. I also take Echinacea to keep me from getting colds and drink lots of Florida orange juice." George says he plans to keep spreading holiday cheer for another couple of years, and after that he's hanging up his Santa suit. "I keep looking for somebody to take over, so I'm always checking beards."

In the meantime, he'll gladly keep making those lists and checking them twice. "This is really something you do from the heart," he says. "Believing in Santa is about believing in the goodness in all people. It's just good for you – and good for everyone in the community."

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