

On being Santa

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By Brandy Ford/Photography by Steve Henschel



Tom Bacolini is a popular guy during the holiday season. He's held two-day-old babies and chatted with 90-year-old grandmothers. He's been surrounded by Girl Guides and cheerleaders. He's even posed with an expectant mother who wanted her unborn child to have a photo with Santa in utero. Bacolini, otherwise known as Santa Tom, says being a professional Santa is something he looks forward to all year.

Santa Tom arrives at the Seaway Mall, in Welland, typically mid-November and listens to the Christmas wishes of the community right up to the last minute on December 24. This will be Santa Tom's seventh year at the mall and he says he “loves“ the job.

“I love the kids. They're great,” he says. “The youngest I've held is two-days old...now younger than that is minus five-months old. The girl came in pregnant with her belly sticking out and said ‘I want you to listen to my child's wishes for Christmas.’”

Santa Tom obliged, listened to the mother's belly and posed for the photo. Besides the usual line up of excited children waiting to meet Santa, he laughs as he talks about the more mature crowd coming for a visit.

“They're probably in their 90s,” he says. “Not guys, but the ladies, and they like to come in and say ‘I've not been good my whole life and I've been having fun, but I'd still like to sit on Santa's knee and get my picture taken.’”

It takes Santa Tom about 20 minutes to prepare before sitting in his chair at centre court. He points out that becoming Santa is not just about putting on a suit; a good Santa needs to be prepared and ready for anything – kids are a tough audience.

“Every year I have to look through the catalogues to kind of get an idea of what's going on and what toys are in,” he explains.

Besides catching up on the latest fads and taking a refresher course on North Pole 101 (who are Santa's top reindeer? How many elves help him make the toys? What is his favourite kind of cookie?) becoming Santa is also physically demanding.

“Some kids are screaming,” he says. “Santa can be scary... he's a strange person. I'll soften my voice and make sure I try to make the child comfortable. But some of the parents don't care if the kid is kicking or screaming because they want to get the photo.”

Santa Tom has been kicked and hit, but it's all just part of the job to him.

“Although I almost thought that I might have to start wearing an athletic support because honestly you have to be in top shape to be there. You have to react fast. If a kid tries to jump off of your lap or they're kicking you have to be ready.”

He takes his job to heart, and a few years ago he decided to be as authentic of a Santa as he possibly could.

“Two years ago I convinced Mrs. Claus that I wanted to grow the beard for the whole year. It didn't turn out,” he chuckles. “My hair was grey; not white. You think I could dye it white? I went everywhere.”

Since he couldn't get his own beard the perfect Santa white colour he ended up wearing a fake beard, and when he got home on the last shift of the season someone was waiting for him at the door.

“Mrs. Claus actually had the clippers and the scissors waiting for me when I came home,” he laughs. “She said 'It's coming off'. Every year people ask if I'm growing it and I have to tell them that Mrs. Claus thinks it's a bad idea.”

Santa Tom says he has had a few interesting requests over the years.

“The biggest request was the girl who wanted \$10,000, but I think it was so she could help people. It wasn't for herself and I thought that's kind of neat.”

He also mentions a time when a child came in asking Santa to look after her brother.

“The brother was sick and in the hospital...it hit me hard,” he says. “But Santa can't cry. He always has to look good for the kids.”

Santa Tom says his goal is to create “a good rapport with the child” and “leave that child feeling happy” after a visit.

There are times, however, that he is faced with scepticism and doubt from children, and he does his best to keep their belief alive.

“I get asked where my reindeer are all the time (they are waiting for him on the mall roof) or why don't I remember what is in the letter they already sent me (because the elves and Mrs.

Claus are busy putting all the letters into the computer) or, the big one, 'you're not the real Santa' (he's one of Santa's special helpers).”

“This is all for the kids. I want them to go through the proper phases like we did. Believe in Santa Claus. Believe in the Tooth Fairy. Believing doesn't hurt you when you're an adult...it's a fun time for kids. Christmas is a fun, fun, time so let's make sure it stays as fun as possible.” He loves “walking around the mall” because even the most doubtful people acknowledge Santa. “Everybody waves to Santa. Everybody. I'll wave and it will be a kid like 14 and he'll wave, but kind of so nobody sees.”

Being Santa also has a few perks. “You get the kids that want to come up and hug you and high five you. And you also get the kids that want to bribe you, which is great,” he laughs. “They'll bring cookies or pictures or stuff like that.”

Even the parents want to make sure Santa is taken care of. “Some fathers suggest leaving Santa a steak and a beer [on Christmas Eve]. I tell them unfortunately Santa doesn't drink, but a steak would be nice,” he laughs.

Santa Tom's Check List:

Santa Tom makes sure the kids know they've got to work hard to keep their name on the Nice

List by asking them three questions.

1. Is your room clean?

“Kids usually look at you like ‘not quite; we usually keep the door closed’,” he says.

2. Are you doing your homework?

Listening to your teacher and continuing to learn will impress Santa and ensure a stocking full of goodies.

3. Do you like Brussels sprouts?

Trying a few veggies at supper will score points with the big guy.