

P1^{the} Weekly Plus

CORPORATE Kringles

AL MIESCH says the role of Santa just seems to, well... suit him!

At 55, Miesch — a retired area power controller who now does contract work for Consumers — has worn a beard for more than half his life. In fact, he's often mistaken for old Kris Kringle, even when his costume's at home.

"I was at Meijer in Traverse City just recently and there was a Santa there with a fake white curly beard," Miesch said. "The store manager took one

look at me and said, 'We've got the wrong Claus.' I just laughed and said, 'There's a lot of imposters out there.'"

Miesch has been known to use his Santa likeness to come to the aid of parents with unruly youngsters in tow.

"I was walking through the mall the other day and stumbled

upon some kids who weren't behaving," he mused. "I went over and said, 'You know, Santa Claus is watching you, and you don't have that many days until Christmas.' Their dad just loved it. They calmed right down."

Miesch has been playing Santa for about six years now. His gigs have included appearances at

churches, banks, schools...even weddings!

This year, for the second year in a row, he was guest of honor in Jackson's downtown Christmas parade.

Of course, while sitting on golden thrones and reindeer-drawn sleighs looks glamorous, it does have its perils.

"Kids tug on your beard," Miesch laughed. "Last year, I even had a couple punch me in the stomach to see if it was real or padding."

And, he added, "After the parade, your arms are sore for days from all the waving."

Paul Thomson, 52, has been playing Santa for about 16 years. While he really looks forward to it each year, he agrees that it can be demanding physically.

"It's ungodly hot in the heavy red suit, beard and wig," said Thomson, a customer energy specialist in Howell. "You

*Employees Spread Holiday Cheer,
Disguised as Old St. Nick*

STORY BY PARRI SONTAG

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just sweat to death."

"And, I kid you not," he laughed. "When you're sitting down and trying to lift some of these kids onto your lap, it's like lifting a dumbbell."

Still, stepping in for Santa is so rewarding, it's worth the occupational hazards, Miesch and Thomson agree.

"To see the joy on kids' faces when they see Santa — what a good feeling," Thomson said.

Miesch and Thomson are just two of a handful of Consumers Energy employees and retirees around the state

"There are some really offensive Santas out there," Smith said. "Sometimes, at a mall, you'll actually see Santa Claus come out with a cheap suit and tennis shoes with fake leather spats tied on to give the illusion of boots."

"Santa should walk in with some pride in the way he's dressed. He's an outdoorsman. He's a hearty man, and his outfit should show that."

Equally important, Smith said, is pride in one's facial hair.

"I've seen some Santas with their fake moustaches falling over their mouths," he said. "Their black beard is showing through, and they don't bother to whiten their eyebrows. A lot of kids — especially when they get to that age where they're on the verge of becoming non-believers — see that and think, 'Yup, my older brother was right. That guy's a fake.'"

"And some of these Santas have the personality of a wet rag. You've got to talk to kids, ask them if they have any questions about the North Pole. You can't just be there to entertain the camera."

To get in the groove of thinking like Santa, Santa school has students fabricate a personal vision of the North Pole.

"You have to be able to envision it completely, because kids ask what it looks like," Smith said. "You need to be able to explain it."

And of course, no Santa school would be complete without teaching the art of the "Ho, ho, ho!"

"A really loud 'Ho, ho, ho' is discouraged," Smith said. "Santa Claus is a pretty ominous person to kids. He's a big man, and they can be kind of intimidated. You don't want to send them running."

"I have a ball interacting with the kids and telling stories about the North Pole."

Smith feels strongly that Santa isn't someone to take lightly.

"I've been to Christmas parties where Santa comes dancing through, doing kooky things," he said. "I've had people ask to borrow my Santa suit, because they want to play a joke on someone. I say 'No.' Santa Claus is a very important person. He's been around for 1,500 years. I feel like I'm portraying a very respectful character. I don't take it as a joke at all."

Company Santas agree that they're not in it for the money — just the spirit of the season.

"I had one kid last year at our Club's Christmas party who was on the edge

"To see the joy on kids' faces when they see Santa — what a good feeling."

who help out the real Santa each year by making local appearances.

Ron Card of Okemos, a meter reading field leader in Lansing, played Santa aboard the Consumers Energy float in this year's Silver Bells in the City Parade in Lansing last month.

Card has stepped in for Santa for more than 10 years. At 55, he describes himself "as big as Santa and just as jolly, too."

Art Hedlund of Grand Rapids, an apprentice lineworker at North Kent, has played Santa for about five years.

"I have a lot of fun," Hedlund said. "It's neat to see the same kids year after year. I remember when this set of twins was just born. Now they're walking and talking. It's neat to watch them grow up."

One thing all of the Santas agree on: They definitely feel different when they're in the suit.

"It really does make you feel the role," Card said. "I feel jovial in it."

"I turn into a kid myself, in a way," agreed Dean Smith, a qualified welder at the B.C. Cobb plant. "I have a ball interacting with the kids and telling stories about the North Pole. I really feel like they leave happy."

Smith, 32, takes Clausing so seriously, he has actually attended the Charles W. Howard Santa Claus School in Midland — with Santas from all over the world. He attends a three-day workshop every year in October.

Santa school, he said, teaches would-be Santas everything from the history of Santa to useful facts about reindeer, elves and the North Pole.

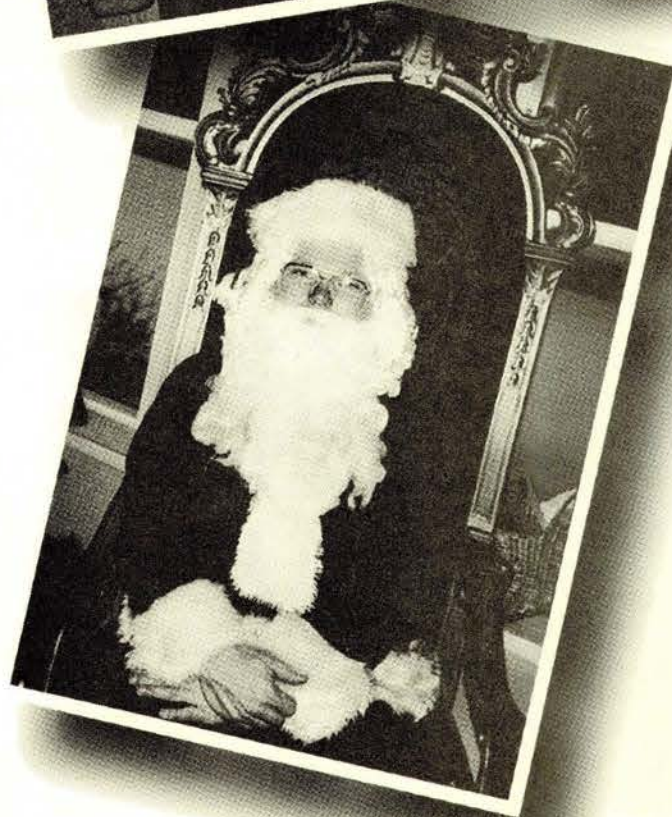
Smith has learned sign language to communicate with deaf children; how to initiate and lead a Christmas sing-a-long; and vocal techniques to avoid straining his voice.

But perhaps the most important part of Santa school is learning to think and act like old St. Nick. For starters, there are intense tutorials on the proper way to don the gear.

CORPORATE SANTAS BRING HOLIDAY CHEER.

page one: Santa Al Miesch has fun with his unusual likeness to the real Kris Kringle.

top to bottom: Santa Ron Card welcomes elves during the Lansing Christmas parade; Santa Paul Thomson poses with the daughter of Camile Powers; and Santas Dean Smith and Art Hedlund gear up for the shopping season.



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of being a nonbeliever," Smith said. "His older brother and sister had been telling him that Santa Claus isn't real. Well, I had hired a guy with a live reindeer and had him on the outside deck of the club, with all the drapes closed. No one knew the reindeer was out there.

"I said to the kid, 'Hey, if I showed you one of my reindeer right now, would you believe?' Then I stood up and brought him over to the window and pulled the drapes open. There was the reindeer. He turned around and gave me this huge hug and said, 'I told them you were real.'"

Santas agree that their most touching experiences are their interactions with children. The majority, they say, have humble requests.

"I'll never forget a party where this one little girl said all she wanted for Christmas were some mittens and some crayons," Hedlund remembered. "That happened to be what we were giving away. She came back to me and said, 'You really, truly are Santa!'"

Still, company Santas have taken requests for everything from horses, boats and jet skis to new brothers and sisters.

Thomson said he's even fielded requests for cash.

"One 7-year-old just wanted money," he laughed. "I said, 'Don't you want a present or some surprise?'"

"He said, 'No, just cash.'"

Nevertheless, Miesch said, "Most kids aren't as selfish as you think. About 96 percent only ask for one thing. I've gone into schools with a lot of underprivileged children and a lot of them have said, 'I don't care if you get me anything, but would you please get my mother or my brother this one thing?' I just wish I could win the lottery and take care of them all.

"To be able to find out where kids live and deliver their wishes secretly ...that would be the greatest feeling on earth." ■