

FYI | with

# Fred Clark

BY BRIANNA SNYDER  
PHOTO BY JOHN CARL D'ANNIBALE

**F**red Clark kind of looks like he was born Santa Claus. But he's only really been Santa since 1998.

That was when his wife suggested he apply to be Santa at Hewitt's, who had put an ad out looking for a good Kringle. "I had to glue a mustache and fake beard on the first year," Clark says. "That was how I got started."

Today, Clark's fully bearded year-round. His Honda is decked out with reindeer decals on either side of the car and an external speaker system that can blare Christmas carols for everyone within the vicinity.

We asked Claus — er, Clark — a few questions.

**So you started as Santa almost 20 years ago.**

I worked in schools as a custodian for 31 years. So when my wife said, "Why don't you go and do that?" I did. And I loved it. Now, I'm not Santa starting Dec. 1. I'm Santa every day of the year because I keep the beard full, year-round. I see children out with their families and they talk to me and take pictures with me.

**Does it bother you? Being photographed and yelled at all the time?**

Nah. It's part of my life.

**How has being Santa changed over the years?**

I have a little 4-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter who's lived with us since she was born. She's so smart. All kids are smart. They figure things out and it's just amazing how they do it. They know what they want. They're asking now for cell phones or laptops or ... what do you call those other things?

**Tablets?**

Tablets! Kids ask for different toys today and it's understandable. Like this Minion thing, oh my God. The kids, wherever you go. It's crazy. Last year was "Frozen."

**So you think Minions will be the big thing this year.**

Oh, God, yeah.



real-life  
Santa  
Claus!

**Have you always loved Christmas?**

Yes, I have. I'm from a large family; there were 17 of us, all from the same mom and dad. When I was a kid, my older brothers and sisters and everybody, my whole family, we would go out on the weekends early in the morning and pick evergreen and princess pine and put it in burlap sacks. My mom and dad used to make Christmas wreaths and we'd sell them to florists and my brothers would drive up to New York City and sell them.

**Who's the best Santa ever?**

I enjoyed watching that "Miracle on 34th Street."

**What's the hardest thing about being Santa?**

Some of the kids are sincere. They're not being wiseguys. They're being sincere. I had a little boy, he was about 11 or 12. He said to me, "Santa, my grandma is very sick in the hospital. Do you think you could make her better?" I said, "I can say a prayer for your grandma. I'll try my best." But she didn't make it. She passed away.

**That must be hard for you.**

Oh, yeah.

**What makes you mad?**

There's so much bad stuff on the news today. You know about families and kids, well, even adults, getting messed up with drugs. The drugs and alcohol, it's ruining the world. Not just Saratoga and Albany and New York State, the whole world. It's bad, bad stuff. And that stuff makes me mad, when people are selling it to high school kids. Watching the news is depressing.

**Do you think of Christmas as a kind of antidote to that?**

I don't know. At Christmastime, people drink a lot, too.

**Do you listen to Christmas carols all year?**

"Must Be Santa" is my favorite Christmas song. It's a singalong song. I have it in my car all the time.

**Can you tell me a story of a time when a kid was really terrible?**

I had one family over in Vermont, maybe four or five years ago. The little boy, he was just kicking and I mean literally screaming. I had to hold his arms and they said, "Go ahead, take the picture." They wanted him in his natural state. They made a Christmas card out of it. I'm not saying that happens every year, but does it happen? And, yes, have I ever had a child with poopy pants? Yes. That happens.

**What's your current mood?**

I'm happy, honey! I'm happy. This is my favorite time of year. I'm happy. ■