

# Jolly old elf for all seasons

By [Leigh Hornbeck](#)

Published Thursday, December 13, 2012  
in the



When your beard is long, curly and white as the driven snow, being Santa is a year-round thing.



[Fred Clark](#) Sr., 70, is the Saratoga Santa Claus. He grew up in the Spa City, the 12th of 17 children. He likes to bet on the ponies, and tells people at the Saratoga Race Course that Santa has a summer home in town because he likes horses as well as reindeer.

Clark's busy season starts Nov. 16. He does parties, fundraisers and house calls. He first played Santa in 1998 and has been perfecting the role ever since. When Clark was younger and his beard was shorter, he looked like Kenny Rogers. The resemblance was his calling card when he worked as a bouncer at Nashville North in Wilton many years ago.

Clark and his wife of 50 years, Carol, raised four children and have eight grandchildren. Carol has a housecleaning business and makes herself scarce during the holidays. She doesn't answer the phone, because it's always for Santa. Clark, who can be seen driving a bright red Honda Element with the license plate Ho Ho Ho MC (the final letters stand for Merry Christmas), starred in an ad for Mohawk Honda. It's running this week. The following, in Clark's own words, are the things he's learned during his years as Santa:



The first year I wore a fake beard and a moustache that was glued onto my own moustache. It was terrible. I said, "No way, next time I'm growing out my beard." If I didn't love doing it, I wouldn't keep the beard year-round.

Kids have changed. It used to be, "I want a tow truck. I want a Barbie." This one little girl who came to see me had a list with 31 things on it, all numbered. Kids are asking for an iPod, an iPad — electronics. My wife bought me a laptop three years ago, I don't know how to turn it on, and that's how I want it right now.



Kids tell the truth. I had this one little boy sit on my knee and I could see his dad a little ways away, leaning up against the wall. I asked him, "How's Dad, how's Dad doing today?" He says to me, "Not good. Daddy got a DWI." Another time I asked a kid, "How's Grandpa doing?" and he said, "Not good. He's been using bad words around the house today."

Kids are funny. The other day I was doing a breakfast with Santa. A little boy, 4 years old, sat on my lap and when I asked him what he wanted, he said, "I want an ATM machine!" Everyone heard it, and we all started laughing.

I'm more fussy about my hair than a lady. My wife tells people I spend more time in the bathroom than she does. I put mousse in my beard, and I use moustache wax to get the points to look just right. I take this very seriously. If I have a job at 7:30, I'm in the bathroom getting ready at 5:30.

I have two custom-made suits and a pair of custom boots, made from Italian leather. My pants legs used to ride up until I put a piece of Velcro around my foot to keep the pants down. I don't wear the hat. It's hot and it messes up my hair.

I'll be driving down the Northway going 75 miles an hour, dressed in the suit, and a young guy comes up beside me with his phone out the window taking a picture. I wave.



When a kid is afraid of Santa, I take out a music box shaped like a big pocketwatch. Inside, a miniature winter scene spins around a watch face to the tune of "Jingle Bells." It works 85 percent of the time.

When kids ask for something big — like a real, live puppy or an iPad, I look to Mom or Dad. If they shake their head, I say, "Santa will try, but Santa works with Mom and Dad. Santa doesn't do anything that isn't OK with them."

Sometimes a kid will come up and say, "I don't want anything for Christmas, but can you make my grandma better? She's sick." Or they say, "Mommy and Daddy are getting a divorce. Can you make it so they get back together?" I say, "I'll say a prayer for them, honey. Santa will say a prayer."