



Being Santa Claus

photograph by RICK GARGIULO



photograph by ED BURKE

Santa Claus, alias Fred Clark and his wife, Carol, take a moment in their home to prepare for their busiest weeks of the year. Though Clark acknowledges he's Santa every day of the year, those days leading up to Christmas are clearly busier than others.

It's no easy job

story by PAUL POST

fred Clark, also known as Santa Claus ... or is it the other way around?

The Spa City resident looks and acts so much like the jolly old elf that sometimes *he's* not even sure.

From his "HoHoHo" license plate to the "You Better Be Good" suspenders, everything about him says this is the real-deal St. Nick.

"It's not one day," Clark said. "I'm Santa Claus every day of my life. Everywhere we go people come to me with their children and grandchildren and want to talk with me and have their picture taken."

Even in summer, it's hard not to look like Santa if you really are. With wavy white hair and a long, immaculately groomed beard to match, Clark turns quite a few heads at Saratoga Race Course each year.

"My wife says I spend more time in the bathroom with my beard than a lot of ladies do with their hair," he said, laughing.

The double identity started about seven years ago when his wife, Carol, encouraged him to answer an ad from Hewitt's Garden Center, which was looking for a Santa look-alike.

"You love kids," she told him. "Give it a try."

Back then, Clark could have doubled for singer Kenny Rogers, because they both wore their hair and beards the same way. In fact, to be Santa at the time, he had to wear a fake beard and bring his own suit.

Little by little, however, as he's dressed and played the part, Clark has slowly transformed himself into the real thing.

"I don't play Santa," he declared. "I am Santa, year round. That's the truth." ►



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At left, Fred Clark inspects a variety of Santas he and his wife, Carol, have collected over the years. On the facing page, Fred takes on the full Santa Claus persona, appearing to offer one last reminder to everybody: He's watching.

So how does one get to rank among the most adored figures on earth, the hero of millions of children worldwide? It's no easy task and involves a great deal of sacrifice.

For starters, Santa must always be on his best behavior, even when standing in long lines at the mall. He can't lose his temper, cuss or make rude comments.

"It's like announcers on TV," he said. "Especially if there are kids around."

When going out to dinner, he's strictly a tea-totaler because his nose is already too red and he can't afford to get pulled over for SWI (Sleighbing While Intoxicated).

"If I go to a restaurant and have a beer, when people come in with children, I get rid of it," he said.

Driving eight reindeer (plus Rudolph) requires a great deal of strength, so Santa makes regular trips to the gym to keep his upper body in shape. However, his exercise regimen is a delicate balancing act, because he has to maintain his stout, rotund appearance. As much as he'd like, Santa can't hang out at Malibu Beach, pumping iron and building up abs of steel.

"Don't lose too much weight," said a friend, running in place next to him on a treadmill machine.

Of course, the absolutely most difficult thing is trying to remember who's been good or bad each year and keeping countless wish lists in order.

"It's amazing what kids ask for," Santa said. "They want iPods, electronic toys, computers. It's amazing the kids that want cell phones."

Occasionally, a dissatisfied 10-year-old will spot him in February or March and

complain that he didn't get what he asked for.

"Whoops, sorry," Santa says. "I must have made a mistake and left it at the house next door. I'll make it up to you next year."

Then there's always the request that tugs at Santa's heartstrings. Before his career change, Clark was a humble school custodian.

"I'd have kids come up to me and say, 'I want you to help get my parents back together for Christmas,'" he said. "I've had other kids say their mom or dad is sick. Can they get better? Those are the things that kind of get to you."

In short, being Santa isn't as easy as it looks. But fortunately, spreading cheer has its light moments.

"I asked one kid, 'Has your daddy been good?'"

"No."

"No? What happened?"

"He got a DWI!"

This time of year, his appointment calendar is booked tighter than Hillary Clinton's campaign schedule. There are breakfasts with Santa, hospital and nursing home visits, restaurants and private parties to attend.

"You would not believe the money, time and effort people go through for Christmas, the way they decorate their houses. It's wonderful," Mr. Claus said. "And there's a lot of wonderful people."

From kids, the most frequently asked question is, "How can you be the real Santa? I saw another one just like you at the mall?"

"No," he replies patiently. "He's just a helper. His beard isn't real."

"If they want to pull my whiskers, I tell them to go ahead," Santa adds. "See?"

Then some kid's overzealous father gives a tug, too.

At home, Santa gets ready for his whirlwind Dec. 24 voyage by watching his favorite Christmas movies and making sure Rudolph's GPS system is working right. His house is a regular Santa Claus enclave with a glass display case full of porcelain Santa figurines, a large collection of Christmas nutcrackers and steins, and on his office desk, in large gold letters is an upright sign that says it all: "BELIEVE."

Millions of people have tried to disprove the existence of this famous character, trying to discount him with scientific proof and analysis. The empirical evidence says otherwise. Somebody had to eat those cookies left on the kitchen table Christmas Eve. Somebody left those boot prints on the roof and came down the chimney even though natural gas is more energy-efficient than open-hearth fireplaces.

Santa presses on in the face of 21st-century skepticism because he's real and he knows it.

How much Christmas magic would there be without him?

Like most successful people, Clark attributes his fruitful new life to a good upbringing. He's one of 17 children — eight girls and nine boys — so there were always plenty of kids around to share the Yuletide with.

"Christmas has always been special for me," he said. "It all fell into place." 



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