



The Story Behind Saratoga's Santa

Story by *Chelsea DiSchiano*
Photos provided

Santa Claus's home looks just how one would imagine it: A quaint little home filled with Christmas trinkets, toy elves and, of course, Santa's workshop. It just so happens that Santa lives in a home only blocks away from the heart of downtown Saratoga Springs.

Sitting behind his large wooden desk, Fred Clark is the perfect picture of an off-duty Santa Claus. Wearing his usual red suspenders with "I Love Saratoga" inscribed on them, he sits back in his chair with his baby granddaughter

resting on his hip, and his long, curly white beard and sparkling eyes perfectly encompass the universal image of what Santa Claus should look like.

Plenty of people dress up as Santa Claus during the holiday season year after year, making appearances in malls as children line up for hours waiting to tell St. Nick their Christmas wishes. The difference between those Santas and the Saratoga Santa is that he plays the part every day of his life, no matter what the season.

Clark first got involved in the Santa role when his wife, Carol, encouraged him to play Santa at the Hewitt Garden Center in 1998.

"I had a fake beard back then," Clark joked. Before resembling Santa Claus, Clark was told by friends and coworkers that he looked just like country singer Kenny Rogers—before the plastic surgery, Clark said.

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Clark is somewhat of a celebrity in the little town of Saratoga Springs, known for his red PT Cruiser with a license plate reading “HoHoHoMC” and wearing red suspenders daily. Saratoga Winery even created a red wine for the holidays that pictures Clark’s face on every bottle, and his appearances at the Saratoga Racetrack in the summertime always intrigue children who are stunned to see Santa Claus in their very own town.

“Some kids are pretty shocked when they see me,” Clark said. “Their wheels are always turning—some kids will ask me outright, ‘Why are you here?’ and I tell them, ‘Santa loves to come to Saratoga because he likes to watch the horses run. This is where I vacation.’ Sometimes if they’re really sharp, they’ll ask me where I live, and so I tell them we own a little house here in Saratoga because we come visit so much.”

Clark said that each summer, he

brings a red and white lawn chair that says “Santa” on the back of it to the racetrack so he can provide more opportunities for the kids to take pictures with him, though he doesn’t wear the full Santa suit—just shorts and his “I Love Saratoga” suspenders. He also hands out business cards for the children that read “You have just met the real Santa.”

Clark is already planning ahead for his appearances at the track next season.

“Next year, the racetrack will be celebrating its 150 year anniversary, and my wheels are always spinning,” Clark said. “So I’m trying to offer an idea to the track, I was thinking they could have a little tent set up outside for me and I could take pictures with the children for \$5 and the track could donate the money to the Jockeys’ Guild, or something like that.”

Clark had to work several different

jobs before finding his true calling as Santa Claus. His jobs over the years included being a police officer, a barber, and a prison guard and correction officer before becoming a custodian in Saratoga Springs schools for 31 years. Clark worked in the school district until his retirement in 2004.

Now that he is working as Santa, Clark makes appearances for paid gigs, as well as doing plenty of charity work, volunteering in places such as hospitals, schools and nursing homes. His experiences have brought him both happy and sad experiences with children.

“There was one little boy in the hospital who had two brain tumor operations,” Clark remembered. “I visited him, and he loved Santa. But he died about four days before Christmas that year.”

Clark also told a story about a young boy whose only Christmas wish was for his parents to get back together.



Though there are plenty of sad or bittersweet stories, being Santa has also provided Clark with funny stories and experiences.

“When I worked at Maple Avenue, there was a kid who had Down syndrome and he was my little buddy,” Clark said, smiling. “During Christmas I would wear my ho-ho-ho suspenders, and he would see me in the hall

and grab his belly and yell out “Ho, ho, ho,” Clark laughed. “I loved that kid.”

Clark even gets noticed when he is out to eat with his family. Once, after eating at a restaurant with his wife, he got a funny note on the back of his check: “Dear Santa, I want a shiny red car like yours for Christmas,” his waitress wrote.

“It’s breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Wherever we go, people want to take pictures with us,” Clark said. “It’s not just when Christmas season rolls around—I do Santa every day of my life.”

Clark added that he was recently in Connecticut with his wife when an older woman saw him and asked him if he plays Santa.

“I don’t play Santa, honey,” he told her. “I am Santa.” ☺

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