



rad santa
Before finding his calling playing Santa Claus, Saratogian Fred Clark portrayed country star Kenny Rogers.

season

Have You Been Naughty Or Nice, Saratoga?

FRED CLARK HAS BEEN BRIGHTENING THE SPA CITY'S HOLIDAY SEASON FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES.

BY HANNAH KOTLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCESCO D'AMICO
EXCLUSIVELY FOR **saratoga living**

Picture this: You get a call from an unknown number and hesitantly pick up the phone. Who's on the other line? Santa Claus. That's the situation I found myself in this past November, when Fred Clark, known throughout town as "The Saratoga Santa," called me to schedule a time to meet up.

With his thick white beard, charming red suit and heart as full as his belly, Clark's been bringing Father Christmas to life in Saratoga Springs for more than two decades

and, honestly, it's hard to believe he isn't actually from the North Pole. His at-home factory—a Christmas-themed office space, not a toy workshop—and Santa-mobile, complete with a custom Christmas vanity plate, Santa self-portrait car wrap and soon-to-be installed Christmas lights, only make him that much more believable as Kris Kringle himself.

But given how big those black boots are to fill, it shouldn't be surprising that Clark hasn't always played Santa. In fact, before growing out his beard, he portrayed country artist Kenny Rogers, winning several lookalike competitions, until his wife convinced him to answer a 1998 Hewitt's Garden Center advertisement looking for someone to play Santa. For that first year, Clark had to glue on a fake beard and mustache to complete the look, but was hooked on the idea of making people's wishes come true. Things snowballed from there, and nowadays, Clark's booked every holiday season with private home visits, breakfasts, commercials and branding deals all over the Capital Region and Vermont. "Wherever I go, I get recognized," he says. "When you're Santa, people just want to talk." I can't help but wonder out loud if that ever gets annoying, but he assures me it's the best part of the job. "I get to meet so many wonderful people," he says. Now that's a Santa I can believe in.

