

Saratoga Santa continues to delight young and old

STAN HUDY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Saratoga Santa checks his list of appearances at his home office while surrounded by memorabilia and notes from his visits with people through the years.

BY STAN HUDY
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Santa Clauses can be spotted in many locations around the Capital Region from Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve, but there's one Mr. Claus who keeps his office in the Capital Region year-round — Saratoga Santa.

Saratoga Santa can be seen in his civilian clothes throughout the year at restaurants, diners and even sometimes at Walmart, driving his Honda Santa sleigh with its own holiday lights, sound system and decorative

wrap around the vehicle.

In fact, Saratoga Santa has always called Saratoga Springs his home.

Saratoga Santa is one of 17 children and was born and raised in the Spa City. He had several jobs throughout his early days —

a Saratoga Springs police officer, a bouncer and even a custodian before he received his calling to become Saratoga Santa.

"It all happened because of my wife," Saratoga Santa said. "She saw an ad in the Saratoga paper

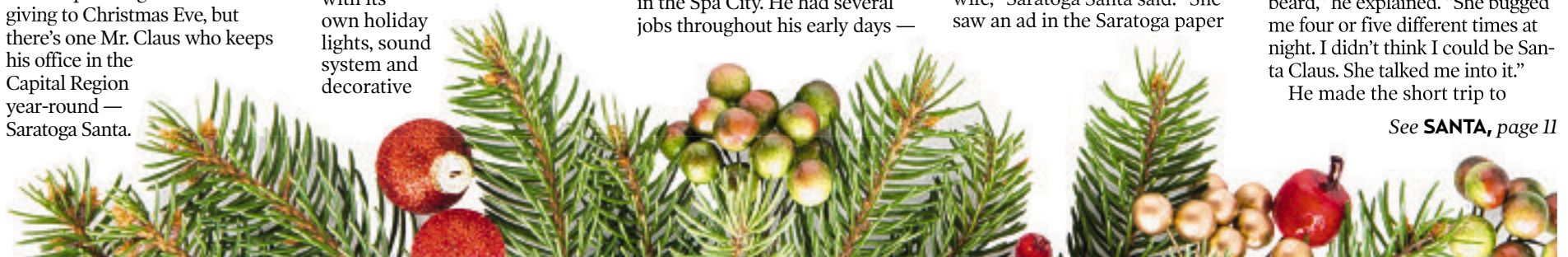
that Hewitt's Garden Center was looking for a Santa Claus."

At first he didn't think he was the right man for the job.

"Back then I had a real short beard," he explained. "She bugged me four or five different times at night. I didn't think I could be Saratoga Santa. She talked me into it."

He made the short trip to

See **SANTA**, page 11



Santa

Continued from page 10

Hewitt's, where the manager knew he had found the right man for the job.

"He looked at me with a short beard, my real belly and all that stuff," Saratoga Santa said. "He said I don't have a suit big enough to fit you. I said no problem. I'm going to buy a fake beard because mine was very short, and I'll buy my own suit.

"That happened in 1998," Saratoga Santa said. "The following year I grew out my beard and the rest is history."

The outfit may have changed — a suit always custom-made for Saratoga Santa by The Costumer in Schenectady and his boots custom-made in Italy — but his laugh and impeccable look have not.

We caught up with Saratoga Santa at his office in Saratoga Springs, behind his computer and surrounded by a number of Santa Claus dolls, figures and memorabilia, along with his binders on bookshelves that hold notes, facts and records of the people he has met throughout the years.

"When I meet people like you and your wife, whoever, in a restaurant, I just make a note," Saratoga Santa said.

That's where many of his stories begin: "I was eating with my wife [insert diner, restaurant here]."

"There was an older couple sitting a couple of tables over. They were retired. He's from Florida," Saratoga Santa recalled. "The guy comes over to the table, says hello and says, 'Santa, I want a new dock for my boat.' Here's an adult man just being funny, and I said I would try. I made a note of that."

Often he will be handed a drawing from a child during a meal out with Mrs. Claus — each picture precious.

"They may draw me, they may draw a Christmas tree," Saratoga Santa said. "I date it. I might put the child's name on it, and I will keep it."

While he was reluctant to answer that first request to become



PHOTO PROVIDED

Saratoga Santa makes his way through Saratoga Spa State Park during the holiday season.

'Legos, Barbie dolls always seem to be there, and [the film franchise] "Frozen" is still a big thing. Now, cellphones, electronic games and gift cards. A lot of kids will ask for gift cards so they can buy games to play on their iPad, computers or phones.'

SARATOGA SANTA

On some of the gifts he hears requested most frequently

Santa, Christmas was always part of his life.

"When I was a kid, all my older

brothers, sisters [all 17], we'd go out in the woods on weekends, Saturday and Sunday, and pick

Princess Pine," Saratoga Santa said. "It's a fine evergreen, but little sticks, and bushy and green. Then we would make wreaths and roping out of it. That's how we got our Christmas. They used to sell it to Dehn's flowers."

The plant, now protected in New York state, was a source of income for the family more than 50 years ago.

"My older brothers rented a huge truck, and they would bring wreaths and roping to New York City and sell it to the florists there," Saratoga Santa said. "That's how we made our Christmas."

Throughout the years, Saratoga Santa has fielded a variety of toy and gift requests.

"Legos, Barbie dolls always seem to be there, and [the film franchise] 'Frozen' is still a big thing," he said. "Now, cellphones, electronic games and gift cards. A lot of kids will ask for gift cards so they can buy games to play on their iPad, computers or phones."

Sometimes there are Christmas wishes Saratoga Santa can't guarantee, but he will always try to help.

"One lady I saw, I could tell she had health issues. I asked her what she wanted for Christmas," Saratoga Santa recalled. "She said, 'All I want for Christmas is to be cancer-free.'"

Sometimes the toughest requests are not for the people on his lap.

"At one church, a well-dressed grandma sat on [my] lap. Her grandchildren were there and everything," he said. "She said 'Santa, my husband has lung disease, he's not doing well. Could you help me?'"

He paused, grabbed a tissue and dabbed his eyes, still bright under his white eyebrows as he continued telling the story.

"All I can do is to try my best and I promise you that I will say a prayer for you," Saratoga Santa remembered telling the woman. "And I did."

This holiday season Saratoga

Santa has seen an uptick in his requests for visits — at private homes, public events and more. It's all a joyous welcome after limiting his interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I have red and green lights on top of my vehicle. I installed a sound system with a big speaker that can play music outside the vehicle so I can sing, talk to kids when I couldn't go inside homes," he said. "I'd pull into the driveway. The family stayed near the home. There was no hugging, none of that stuff, but it all worked out wonderfully."

Gift-giving at Christmastime is a team effort, so Santa does his best with requests from children, and gives credit to the parents and other family members.

"I ask the little boy or girl, 'When you wake up Christmas morning, what gift would you like to see from me?'" he says. "I say if you're good with school or helping mommy pick up your toys, be good, maybe we'll have a little surprise for you."

That is the one toy from Santa — the rest of the gifts get credit where credit is due.

"I tell them there may be just one toy from Santa," he said. "But you remember that your parents buy you other gifts, your grandma or grandpa, aunts and uncles buy you gifts, too. That works out pretty good."

Saratoga Santa wouldn't divulge his age, but did say he was so old that sometimes even he forgets.

He knows there may come a time when a different white-bearded man will take over his duties.

"We were at a family reunion and my nephew, he has a white beard, too, he looked pretty good," Saratoga Santa said. "I think he may take a turn doing it. I hope that he does."

Until then, Saratoga Santa will be there to spread joy throughout the area.

"I'd love to live to be 100, and still be able to walk and talk," Saratoga Santa said. "This is a big part of my life, being Santa Claus."

