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NEIGHBORS



## The Saratoga Santa Celebrates 25 Years

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**While many know the traditional folklore of Santa, living in the North Pole with Ms. Claus, alongside a crew of reindeer, and an army of hard-working elves, only locals know the truth.** When he's not away in the North Pole, he lives right in town, in the quaint, charming city of Saratoga Springs, NY.

Twenty-Five years ago, Fred Clark's wife, Carol, saw Hewitt's Gardening Center needed a Santa through an ad in the newspaper. She knew her husband was the perfect man for the job. "You've been around kids your whole life," she said, "and you're from a big family."

The year was 1998, he was still working for the Saratoga Springs City school district, which he retired from in 2004

after 31 years. Not to mention, he also came from a family with 17 children, of which he was the 12th child.

Carol's persistence proved to pay off. He answered the ad. The foundation was wobbly at first. The suit provided for him didn't fit — he says he didn't have his belly back then — and his beard was much too short to be presentable as Santa. So, he bought his own suit, put on a fake beard and glued on a mustache. After that first year, he let his beard grow out and never had to fuss with fake facial hair again.

This year Santa will have spent 25 years bringing smiles to generations of children across the capital region, and even the country, when he's vacationing. Making appearances for both public and private events, Santa

also does plenty of charity work, volunteering in places that need his special, magical touch.

With his big red suit, which he gets fitted for every year at The Costumer, his big shiny \$1300 custom-made Italian leather boots, and his custom-made Belt buckle depicting his name, it's safe to say Santa dresses for success. The twinkle in his eye paired with his iconic curly beard and mustache is donned 365 days of the year, extending far beyond the month of December. Unsurprisingly, nearly everywhere he goes children flock to him, which he says is one of the most rewarding parts of his life. Whether he is shopping in the mall, out at the racetrack, or eating at a restaurant with his wife, youngsters can't help but gravitate towards him. Prepared, he keeps a few cards on hand to give out in these situations. After getting permission from the child's guardian, he gives a card with a photo of him with his great-grandson to boys, and a card with a photo of him with his granddaughter to girls. "They all take pictures no matter where we are. It brings smiles to the kids, naturally they're happy to meet Santa, and I'm happy to talk with them and have a picture with them." Santa says.

Before Santa put on his red suit, he was a bouncer at Nashville North, a country bar in Saratoga. He worked as a bouncer for ten years, checking IDs and manning the door. Every Friday and Saturday night there was live music. At the time, the bar used a photo of him to advertise a Kenny Rogers look alike. While working, a woman approached him and explained how much her 12-year-old son, who was legally blind, loved Kenny Rogers. She proposed getting a few bands together on a Sunday afternoon to raise funds for the Blind Association, and asked if Clark would work the door. He said yes, and recalls the fundraiser garnering nearly \$5,000. She told him the next time Rogers comes to Glens Falls, she would make sure to give him backstage passes to the show. The night of the concert she made good on her word. "Kenny and I met, and we had a chat. I told him about my mom and how she loved his music too, and when she passed away, I put a picture of me and Kenny Rogers in the casket" Santa said. Always working a job close to his heart, Santa says over the years

he's met an array of people from all different walks of life. As a materialized beacon of hope for children, sometimes the hardest part of the job is hearing children request things that money can't buy. "I've had a little boy say to me, 'Santa, will you do me a favor? My grandma's in the hospital, she's very sick. Do you think you could make her feel better?'" and I said, 'I'm so sorry, but I will say a prayer for her,' and whenever I tell someone that, I do say a prayer. But she didn't make it, she passed away."

Coming from a large family, Christmas was, and has always been special for Santa. Every winter he would venture into the woods with his brothers, sisters, brothers-in-laws, and sisters-in-laws, equipped with burlap sacks. The entire crew would spend the day picking wild prince's pine, an evergreen beauty that grew about ten inches high from the ground. Once home they got to work plucking the small buds off the shrub, thoroughly preparing it for their mother and father to make wreaths and roping, to later sell to local floral shops. At the same time, his older



Santa and Wife: Left, Carol, Santa's wife

brothers rented a truck and drove to New York City to sell the roping and wreaths down south.

His father never owned a vehicle, and after working in textile for years, made money by riding his bike to homes and mowing lawns locally. "That's how we got our money for Christmas," Santa said, "It's always been special time for me. Good memories."

The Saratoga Santa was born here and has lived in Saratoga Springs his entire life. At 19 years old, he married his high school sweetheart, Carol. "Carol is a good name for Christmas," he says laughing, "We never planned that though." While Carol isn't publicly Mrs. Claus at this moment in time, she is an enormous help to Santa when he's booked for the holiday season, from putting his belt through the loops in his jacket, to shining his boots and belt buckle.

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Santa's appearance isn't the only thing that turns heads. Year round he can be seen driving a white Honda pilot, wrapped appropriately on both sides with Santa driving his sleigh with lights strung on top, and a license plate that reads "HoHoHo - MC" - MC an abbreviation for Merry Christmas. The fuel tank door even says "Rudolph Juice" on it. There's a sound system hooked to the back as well, so he can play music when going into private homes for visits. His favorite song to play upon his arrival is "Must be Santa."

The Saratoga Santa has been providing joy for generations of children, and he hopes to stay healthy and bring smiles to all the children for years to come. "It's all been a great part of my life, a big part of my life," Santa said. After all, Santa is timeless.

