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Santa Claus is coming to town

Monday parade to feature authentic holiday icon

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Staff Writer

The Decatur Jaycees didn't need to cajole one of Santa's helpers into donning a rented costume and portraying Mr. Claus for the Decatur Christmas parade Monday.

This year, they have the real deal. Their authentic Santa is fully licensed and insured, a graduate of the University of Santa Claus and member of the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas.

Parade-goers, especially children, will recognize right away that this year's parade Santa is no imitation, Santa said.

'Bigger than life'

"I'm going to give you a show," he said. "You need to let that crowd know that you're bigger than life."

Santa, who uses the alias Greg Tuck so he can operate somewhat incognito the rest of the year, said he's not just a guy who sits and waves from atop the fire truck at the end of the parade.

He strives to make eye contact with the children, especially the shy ones hiding behind their parents' legs, to make them feel Santa came to see them personally.

So how did the Jaycees acquire Santa for this year's parade, which starts at 6 p.m.? Santa contacted them.

He said he wanted to be in the parade and obtained an application only to learn the parade has a one-Santa rule. He inquired to see if organizers planned to use a stand-in. Once the Jaycees learned they didn't have to hunt down a substitute (and pay for the costume), they eagerly accepted the real Santa.

'A real Santa'

"We have a real Santa," was Stacey Puckett's excited answer to *The Daily* earlier this week when the newspaper inquired about possible story ideas.

After talking on the phone with Santa, she followed his advice to check out his Web site, www.santavisitsalabama.com, and was sure she had something special.

"I got on there and was like, 'Wow! This really is the real Santa,'" Puckett said.

Santa shared part of his story of how he merged into the role of a holiday icon.

He owned and managed a construction company in Huntsville for more than 30 years. He devoted his time almost exclusively on his career and admits he often mistakenly put his family on the backburner. However, at Christmas, he would close the business and practically lock himself in his workshop on Cameron Mountain south of Florette where he constructed toys and gifts for family and friends. He's made everything from rocking horses to boot scrapers.

Growing into role

It was the one time each year he felt the most joy, he said, and as he got older and his hair grew whiter, he found growing interest in filling Santa's boots. He started playing Santa for friends, and this past year decided to fully embrace his potential as Santa.

He even plans to use his workshop, capable of turning logs into lumber, to build sleighs for parade floats.

"The thing that kept coming back to me was I want to smile. I want to bring joy to others," he said. "For 35 years, I made dreams come true for (home-buying) adults. For the next years, I want to make dreams come true for children."

With a natural white beard and head of white hair — a gift from stressful decades of running a business, he said — it's almost impossible for him to go out in public and not be recognized as Santa, even without holiday attire.

"There is no doubt in a child's mind, when I walk through a Kmart or Wal-Mart, who I am," Santa said. "They'll say, 'Santa what are you doing here at Wal-Mart? You're supposed to be at the North Pole.'"

Santa said he has recently explained he's in town because NASA engineers at Redstone Arsenal are equipping his sleigh with the advanced GPS equipment so he can navigate to every child's home. If spotted in his vehicle, he can point to the NASA sticker on the windshield to help verify his story.

"To describe being in these boots is like trying to explain the Grand Canyon," he said. "What I'm trying to describe to you is what I see in a child's eye. It takes your breath away."



Daily photos by Gary Cosby Jr.

Taking a break from the rigors of the toy shop, Santa relaxes during a visit to North Alabama. The Jolly Old Elf has agreed to ride in Monday's Jaycees Christmas parade in Decatur, but his reindeer will remain at the North Pole to continue their training regimen for the Dec. 24 ride. Santa issued an urgent appeal to all children in the Decatur area: "I know when you've been bad or good, so be good, for goodness' sake."

