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## FOR THE KIDS / Santa's heart in his job at Almeda Mall; [2 STAR , 8 Edition]

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### Abstract (Summary)

Shop keepers, teens and adult customers smile, while little children wave, shout hello or simply reach up to touch his white-gloved hand or the edge of his red suit when Santa Claus walks through Almeda Mall.

[David Sheffield] began working as Santa in Houston-area malls about 11 years ago at the suggestion of his minister and others who told him he bore an uncanny resemblance to the world's oldest elf supervisor. Now, he works for Sepia, a Houston-based special-events photography company that supplies Santas to about three dozen malls and shopping centers in the Houston area.

"I ask them, 'What do you think?' Sheffield said. "Sometimes, they want to pull my beard to see if it's real. One boy did that and shouted out, 'Hey mom, he is the real Santa Claus!' Basically, everybody wants to believe."

### Full Text (687 words)

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Shop keepers, teens and adult customers smile, while little children wave, shout hello or simply reach up to touch his white-gloved hand or the edge of his red suit when Santa Claus walks through Almeda Mall.

Passing out the season's greetings, it takes the bearded one a while to get from one end of the mall to his pre-Christmas-flight job of listening to the wishes of several hundred excited kids. Or have his snowy white beard tugged by small hands to see if it - and the rosy-cheeked man to which it is firmly attached - are real.

They are.

"There are times when I get tired, maybe didn't sleep so good the night before, but I come to work and I find I enjoy it because of the kids. I really enjoy the kids," said the 69-year-old man who, when he's not at the North Pole or distributing presents around the world, hangs out in the Friendswood area and goes by the name David Sheffield, a retired accountant.

Sheffield began working as Santa in Houston-area malls about 11 years ago at the suggestion of his minister and others who told him he bore an uncanny resemblance to the world's oldest elf supervisor. Now, he works for Sepia, a Houston-based special-events photography company that supplies Santas to about three dozen malls and shopping centers in the Houston area.

He already knew he liked children, since he and his wife, Elaine, have reared two children of their own, a 26-year-old daughter and 24-year-old son. It is the pets he is sometimes photographed with that sometimes cause him to be less than jolly.

"Oh, the rabbits and cats were cute. I guess the strangest was a ferret - or the pair of Rotweilers," he said.

There are a few among his human clientele who also visibly stand out in his memory.

"There was an older boy, about 17 or 18, who said he had had problems with the law," Sheffield said. "He came up and said 'anta, I don't know what to do. Can you help me?' And I got down on my knees and prayed with him, the Lord's Prayer."

A few weeks later, the boy returned to let him know the prayer worked and he didn't have to go to jail, so the two knelt and prayed again on the Santa set, he said.

"People just need some strength sometimes," Sheffield said. "Or reassurance."

Mostly, his visitors just want to tell him about the Spider-Man toys, Barbie dolls, computer games and other items they hope to see on Christmas morning.

Some, like 6-month-old Robert Johnson III, visit at the behest of parents like Sandy and Robert Johnson Jr. of the Hobby area.

"It's his first time to visit Santa," said Sandy Johnson. "They took his picture and he smiled."

Other babies aren't so obliging.

After playing peek-a-boo, choreographing hand puppets, setting off clacking noise makers and making faces, nothing elicited a smile from 1-year-old Celeste Melchor. After a while, her mom, Bonnie Melchor, and her grandfather, Rudy Melchor, of northwest Houston called a halt to the session and walked away with no photo.

Sheffield said he uses a big smile, reassuring tone and a calm manner to try to dispel fears, but sometimes nothing works.

If there are children who tug at his heart a little more than usual, they're the ones with special needs, hyperactive, autistic or who have Down's Syndrome, children who not at all shy about showing their love for Santa Claus or anybody else.

"I kind of have to give them a big, special hug," he said.

Children ask him, year after year, if he's the real Santa, but he continues to leave the decision up to his questioners.

"I ask them, 'What do you think?'" Sheffield said. "Sometimes, they want to pull my beard to see if it's real. One boy did that and shouted out, 'Hey mom, he is the real Santa Claus!' Basically, everybody wants to believe."

#### **[Illustration]**

Photo: One-year-old Price Moran gets a stocking stuffer from Santa, also know as David Sheffield, at Almeda Mall. (color)

Credit: Staff

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