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## JOLLY GOOD TIME / For West Oaks Santa, it's about caring for kids; [2 STAR , 13 Edition]

BETTY L. MARTIN. *Houston Chronicle*. Houston, Tex.: Dec 19, 2002. pg. 1

### Abstract (Summary)

Lavell, 7, who was shopping with his mother, Zaundra Jackson of the west Houston area, asked [Santa Claus] for a PlayStation 2, but said he likes Santa not only for the toys.

"A little girl said she didn't want any presents for Christmas, just for her little sister - whose name was Emily and was premature and in ill health - to come home," Santa said. "I knelt with her and her mother right there on the Santa stage and we prayed together."

Satisfied that the elves could do the job while Santa was away from the North Pole, the girl asked for a hug, a request Santa is always unable to refuse.

### Full Text (957 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 West Oaks Mall.

Passing out the season's greetings and liberal hugs every few steps, it takes the bearded one a while to get from one end of the mall to his daily, pre-Christmas-flight job - listening to the wishes of several hundred excited kids.

Children are his reason for taking on this particular job.

"I remember every one of my children," said the 69-year-old man who identifies himself only as Santa Claus. "If I don't remember a name, I remember their faces."

When he's not sitting through hours of camera flashes with his small, wiggling visitors who frequently pull on his snowy beard to see if it - and the rosy-cheeked man to whom it is naturally attached - are real, he frequently hangs out in Humble with his wife, Maria, and the two youngest of his four children.

He's had other jobs in the past. He was a member of a 1960s band that produced the song "Jim Dandy" and was stationed with the U.S. Air Force at a base in the Philippines during the Vietnam War.

Currently Claus dabbles in real estate, but he readily admits he puts more of himself into this job - so much so that he was featured as Santa Claus on ABC TV's "Downtown 20/20" show two years ago.

Every summer he starts to let his beard grow in anticipation of his favorite seasonal job with Sepia, a Houston-based photography company.

He gets as excited about it as the 300 to 500 youngsters he sees each day from his mall perch each year.

"I just can't wait for Christmas," Santa said.

Neither can Julian, 4, the son of Marco and Mari Martinez of Bear Creek, who was in West Oaks Mall to ask Santa for two presents - a toy car for himself and a train for his brother Roel, 1.

Lavell, 7, who was shopping with his mother, Zaundra Jackson of the west Houston area, asked Santa for a PlayStation 2, but said he likes Santa not only for the toys.

"He is kind," Lavell said.

Mackenzie, who will be 3 in February and is the daughter of Vicky Jarnett of Katy, found it hard to talk to Santa, but her older, 4- year-old brother, Dylan, wasn't as shy.

"He told Santa he wants a Power Ranger," Vicky said.

Five-year-old Callie, the daughter of Lori DeCort, a resident of the Eldridge and Enclave area, wants shoes for a baby doll. She says more to Santa than her brother Cameron, 1, notices at the moment.

"I like to see Santa because Santa is nice," Callie said, "and because he gives me presents."

In the six years since Sepia began posting Santa in malls during the month before Christmas, there have been children whose requests have been etched in his memory.

"A little girl said she didn't want any presents for Christmas, just for her little sister - whose name was Emily and was premature and in ill health - to come home," Santa said. "I knelt with her and her mother right there on the Santa stage and we prayed together."

The next year, the little girl and her mother returned to introduce him to the then-healthy Emily.

He remembers a 6-year-old boy who asked Santa for employment as a full-time elf.

"He kept coming back to see me, saying he wanted to be an elf more than anything in the world," Santa said. "I said that being an elf means you have to live at the North Pole and never see your parents or friends again. He said that's OK, he'd talked it over with them and they understood this was what he was meant to do. He was very determined."

Santa handed him a general job application and told him to ask his mother to help him fill it out, certifying that he was at least 12 years old.

"He puddled up, big tears in his eyes, and said `But I'm not 12. I'm only 6,' " at which point Santa promptly gave him an elf hat and said the matter would come under review in six years, a decision which sent the boy away with a purpose and a smile.

Because his round figure, ruddy complexion and beard are naturally grown, children don't always wait for the holiday season to want to visit him.

"I was in the Ozarks one time, in a restaurant and wearing shorts and a tennis shirt. My wife said to me `You've got a visitor,' and I looked down and there was this little girl. She said `If you're here, who's making my toys?' "

Satisfied that the elves could do the job while Santa was away from the North Pole, the girl asked for a hug, a request Santa is always unable to refuse.

Younger children always want hugs, he said, just as older ones want to know if he's the real Santa.

"I say isn't it more fun to believe?" he said.

Toys change, Santa said, but kids stay the same.

"Some are funny, some are sad, some are shy and some are petrified, but I treat them all the same," he said. "I love them all."

**[Illustration]**

Photos: 1. Megan Todd, 21 months, of Spring Branch, and her cousin, Makenzie Kooken, 5, of Memorial/Dairy Ashford, tell Santa Claus what they want for Christmas. Santa is at West Oaks Mall, Texas 6 and Westheimer (color); 2. Amity Highet, 2, tells Sharpstown Center's International Claus what is on her list for Christmas (b/w, p. 4)

Credit: Staff

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