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**FOR THE KIDS / Not just a gig, it's about love, giving for northside Santa;
[2 STAR , 11 Edition]**

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

Abstract (Summary)

"Everything is for the kids," said the 68-year-old man who, when he's not at the North Pole or distributing toys, spends a lot of time in the Spring Branch area. Known as Herman Holt, he retired in 1999 after 42 years as a commercial truck driver.

Holt said it doesn't matter whether Santa is coming down a chimney with toys, at the North Pole or having his picture made in a mall, casino or cruise ship - the love he represents is universal, he said.

Photos: 1. Robert Hernandez, 2 1/2, visits with Herman Holt at Northwest Mall to be sure he hasn't been left off the list of good little boys and girls. Holt has been working as the Man in the Red Suit since 1999 (color); 2. Herman Holt said he enjoys playing the annual role of Santa (b/w, p. 4)

Full Text (644 words)

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Shopkeeper, 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 Northwest Mall.

Passing out season's greetings, it takes the bearded one a while to get from one end of the mall to his job listening to the wishes of several hundred excited kids, or having 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.

"Everything is for the kids," said the 68-year-old man who, when he's not at the North Pole or distributing toys, spends a lot of time in the Spring Branch area. Known as Herman Holt, he retired in 1999 after 42 years as a commercial truck driver.

"There's a little bit of Santa Claus in everybody," he said.

Holt's work on behalf of children started with his four now-grown kids and continues with his four grandchildren through Little League games, football and band practices.

During the year, he volunteers most of his time at Houston community centers and churches. His wife, Rose, leads ceramics classes - and makes objects like Santa's mailbox, where letters from fans are deposited.

He doesn't call what they do volunteer work.

"It's just being a human being," said Holt, who was born and raised in a small town near Dallas.

Holt is in his fourth year with Sepia, a digital photo company that supplies Santas to about three dozen malls and

shopping centers in the Houston area. Here or elsewhere, he wants to continue his Santa gig.

"I might be Santa in Los Vegas or on a cruise liner," Holt said. "That might be fun."

The thing that's different this year from last year, he said, is that children have recovered from the aftermath of the attacks on America on Sept. 11, 2001, and they want toys again.

"Last year, they wanted to give all their toys away to somebody who didn't have toys, or to the New York police or firemen," he said. "Now they are asking for things again."

The children who wait for an audience with Santa bear out Holt's observation.

"I want a new bicycle," said Natalie Marshall, 5, who was at Northwest Mall with her mom, Diana Marshall of Jersey Village.

Joseph Phillip Clarke, 2 months, son of John Paul Clark of Katy, followed family tradition by having his picture taken with Santa.

"We've got to have pictures made with Santa. I have pictures of John Paul and of his father from every year they were growing up," said Joseph's great-grandmother, Betty Clark, who lives near St. Thomas University and was wearing an elf's hat as she paid for the photo session.

Brooke Current, 3, a little uneasy about sitting on Santa's knee, did manage to convey through her grandmother, Helen Gullick of Oak Forest, that she hoped to see a new doll house on Christmas morning.

"And a pink chair," Brooke said.

Holt said it doesn't matter whether Santa is coming down a chimney with toys, at the North Pole or having his picture made in a mall, casino or cruise ship - the love he represents is universal, he said.

"Santa hasn't really changed since the 1600s," Holt said. "It's still about the same thing. No. 1, we need to love one another and, No. 2, it's more blessed to give than to receive. That's it."

[Illustration]

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Credit: Staff

Indexing (document details)

Author(s): BETTY L. MARTIN
Section: *THISWEEK*
Publication title: Houston Chronicle. Houston, Tex.: Dec 19, 2002. pg. 1
Source type: Newspaper
ISSN: 10747109
ProQuest document ID: 271322391
Text Word Count 644
Document URL: <http://0-proquest.umi.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org:80/pqdweb?did=271322391&sid=2&Fmt=3&cli entId=53902&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

