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Hockley company manages Santas / Cypress resident places St. Nick in area malls; [2 STAR , 14 Edition]

KIM HUGHES, Houston Chronicle Correspondent. Houston Chronicle. Houston, Tex.: Dec 21, 2006. pg. 6

Abstract (Summary)

"I personally try to train every [Santa Claus] we have and make sure they are certified to go out and love these children unconditionally and answer the tough questions," Angelo said. "We want to help them connect in ways not everybody would expect, such as a prayer with a child. If a child asks for something special, like can you bring my daddy home from the war, or can you help my brother or sister who is sick, we provide our Santas - with permission from the parent - the power of prayer."

Ed Niederhofer, one of Angelo's Santas who has been sitting in the big chair at Memorial City Mall for three years, said those are heartbreaking and tender moments.

Community Connection: Sepia Photo Promotions in Hockley trains Santa's every year. Nationally, they have Santas in 175 shopping centers in 35 states.

Full Text (554 words)

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While it's true Santa comes from the North Pole, there are dozens of helpers that come straight out of Hockley.

And they're all trained to perfect their hugs and Ho-Ho-Ho's by Cypress resident Jeff Angelo, founder and president of Sepia Photo Promotions, 26069 Springer Cemetery Road in Hockley.

Angelo has 86 Santas in 55 area malls this Christmas season. Nationally, his company serves 175 shopping centers in 35 states.

"The Santas, they are a peculiar bunch," Angelo said. "We only use gentlemen who have a true heart for the part, and they must have a natural beard. I want authentic. I want people to see that Coca-Cola look we've all grown up with."

Angelo, a 47-year-old father of three, has played Santa himself.

"In the year 2004, Jeff played the role of Santa for one day so he could personally experience what it was like," said Mistie Angelo, Jeff's wife of 22 years. "He grew this long beard and bleached it white. We had just adopted our daughter, Zoe, from a Russian orphanage in November, and he wanted to be our daughter's first experience with Santa. That moment absolutely melted my heart."

Angelo, who used to be in the singing telegram business, founded the company in 1989. It took some time before it took off, but now he's known nationally for his Santas and his Santa School.

"I personally try to train every Santa we have and make sure they are certified to go out and love these children unconditionally and answer the tough questions," Angelo said. "We want to help them connect in ways not everybody would expect, such as a prayer with a child. If a child asks for something special, like can you bring my daddy home from the war, or can you help my brother or sister who is sick, we provide our Santas - with permission from the

parent - the power of prayer."

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"Sometimes I will ask them, what do you want for Christmas? And they will say 'I just want my papa back,' " Niederhofer said. "That's hard, and they're very serious when they say it. I say 'There's not anything Santa can do about it, but I tell you what. Where papa is, he's proud of you, and he's watching over you.' "

Niederhofer also makes sure to end each visit with extra hugs, and a sweet whispered reminder that "Santa loves you."

This is exactly the kind of Santa Angelo wants for every child, every Christmas.

"Sometimes children need more than just a toy," Angelo said. "Sometimes they need a hero."

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AT A GLANCE

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Quick Quote: "Of course, these are all the helpers. We don't really know who the real Santa is among the group." - Jeff Angelo, company founder and president

Fast Fact: Angelo, a 47-year-old Cypress resident, used to be in the singing telegram business and the baby shoe painting business.

[Illustration]

Photo: SHHH: Seven-week-old Hayden Dodd of northwest Houston visits with Santa Claus portrayed by Ed Neiderhofer at Memorial City Mall.

Indexing (document details)

Author(s): KIM HUGHES, Houston Chronicle Correspondent
Section: *THISWEEK*
Publication title: Houston Chronicle. Houston, Tex.: Dec 21, 2006. pg. 6
Source type: Newspaper
ISSN: 10747109
ProQuest document ID: 1187255461
Text Word Count 554
Document URL: <http://0-proquest.umi.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org:80/pqdweb?did=1187255461&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=53902&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

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