



Santa Claus prizes time with children

Local man likes to instill values

By Jeremy Fitzpatrick
Staff Reporter

Santa smiles at two children on his lap.

"I want the two of you to be good kids this year," he says.

Their father interrupts: "Santa doesn't like whiners," he says.

Santa laughs. "That's all part of growing up, isn't it?" he reassures the kids.

In this case, Santa and Don Hogg are one and the same.

Hogg, a 58-year-old Nebraska native, has resumed playing Santa Claus this year after a 25-year absence.

Hogg last took children's Christmas wishes as a social worker at the Nebraska State Orthopedic Hospital between 1963 and 1967. He played Santa for children who had medical problems their family could not afford to treat.

Before Hogg donned the red suit and fluffy, white beard, prisoners from the state penitentiary used to perform the Santa Claus duties in exchange for time off for good behavior. That ended in 1963, Hogg said, when some children saw the leg irons and handcuffs being removed from the prisoners.

"Here was Santa Claus, being set free," he said.

Hogg then took over the duty of playing Santa, which he did until he left the hospital to go to graduate school in 1967.

He said the most enjoyable part of being Santa was surprising the children with how much he knew about them.

"A boy would say, 'you don't know me,' and I would say, 'Yes, your name is Jay,'" he said. "I knew everything about them."

"I had a wonderful time doing it."

Hogg went on to administer the state Medicaid program from 1970 to 1984. Now a semi-retired stockbroker, he decided to return to being Santa Claus this year when he

saw an ad for Santas in the newspaper.

"When I saw an advertisement for Santas, I said, 'I've got to try this again.'"

Hogg works as Santa at Gateway Mall four hours a day, seven days a week. He said the kids were the same nowadays as they were in 1963.

"It's very much the same," he said. "Kids are kids and will always be kids."

Hogg said being a Santa was easy. He just acts like he would around his grandchildren.

"Santa Claus is very much like being a Grandpa," he said. "If you are a Grandpa, you are a Grandpa to all kids."

"That's how Santa is — he belongs to all kids."

When he talks to the children, Hogg said, he tries to instill good values in them as well as taking their Christmas requests.

"I always stress — I want you to be sure and be good next year," he said. "A year from now I want you to come back to see me."

Hogg said he asked the children if they helped their mothers and if they would take care of and pick up the toys they wanted him to bring them.

"Get a little girl, and she wants a baby doll. Well, wonderful," he said. "(I ask her), will you take care of the baby doll? Where will the baby doll sleep?"

"Or if a child wants Rollerblades — I tell them how important it is to be safe."

Hogg said children's requests were generally realistic. Barbies and Rollerblades are the most commonly requested items, he said, although Batman toys are also popular.

Pet requests are also common, he said.

"And if I look over at the parent I can tell if that kid is going to get a dog or cat," he said.

Hogg said he was not sure if he would continue playing Santa after this year.

"I don't know," he said. "I'd sure consider it anytime, because it is such a rewarding experience."



Photos by
Shaun Sartin/DN

Clockwise from upper left: Bob Graveline of Omaha, better known as Santa Claus, listens attentively to the wishes of a young believer at Oakview Mall in Omaha.

On his way to a coffee break, Santa finds a child hoping to tag along.

Lending an understanding ear, Santa tries to calm a bashful child.

A young boy expresses his mouthwatering dreams as an attentive Santa adds the child's wishes to his endless list. Graveline dons his beard and mustache before resuming his seat before the children.

