



James Mehlsing/DN

# Merry old men

*Shopping center Santas spread holiday cheer*

**By Jeff Randall**  
Senior Reporter

Doctors may save lives, lawyers may defend justice and teachers may enlighten.

But for some men, an even more difficult and important task awaits. For approximately one month each year, these noble men suit up for a task that is envied by few but recognized by all.

These men are Santa Claus.

Everyone has seen them, and nearly everyone has sat on one of their laps. The shopping mall Santa Claus is an American tradition that is carried on nationwide each year by thousands of red-suited, white-bearded individuals and their helpers.

But Santa's helpers don't all wear green suits and pointy shoes. Some of them work in slightly less exotic attire.

Theresa Clarke is one of them. As location manager for Santa Plus with Gateway Mall, she is in charge of recruiting, interviewing, hiring, handling payroll, coordinating schedules and a doing a number of other tasks to ensure that her fleet of Santas and their visitors stay jolly.

Clarke said the hiring process for Santa Claus candidates was more rigorous than that for most part-time jobs.

"Background checks have become a big priority. We have to make sure there is no criminal history of molestation, abuse or anything like that."

*"They're asking for more and more expensive things — CD players, computers. It's a lot more expensive to be Santa nowadays."*



**DOUG MORRIS**  
Gateway santa

And beyond the safety concerns, Clarke said, personality played a big part in the final cut.

"The ideal Santa has to be jolly and happy," she said. "I tend to look for guys who are very outgoing and talkative."

Following hiring, Clarke said, the candidates have to go through the Santa School, a 90-minute class that gives prospective Santas a rundown of the rules and practices of the job.

"The class gives them a basic list of dos and don'ts, and most of the job tends to be common sense. We all know what a Santa should be like."

Doug Morris is one of Gateway Mall's seven jolly old elves this year. Morris has had the job for five straight years and is one of four of the mall's returning Santas for the 1995 holiday season.

Morris, whose own children are

still among the Santa faithful ("I just tell them I'm one of his helpers"), said he first got the job by answering a newspaper advertisement.

"I really love kids, and this seemed like a good job to take," he said.

But not all children prove to be as loving or cooperative as desired, Morris said, particularly some of the older ones.

"We get a lot of high school and junior high school kids in on weekend nights who can cause problems. They'll do things like yell out that you're not real, or sit on you lap and pull your beard down."

"It's just one of the things you have to deal with. It comes with the job."

The children who do still believe in Santa, however, aren't as unruly, Morris said. Since he first took the job in 1990, many children's wishes have changed.

"They're asking for more and more expensive things — CD players, computers. It's a lot more expensive to be Santa nowadays."

But Morris said some of his favorite Christmas wishes are the ones he could never hope to fulfill, no matter how much money he had.

"I've had kids who have asked for peace and happiness in the world. One child last year had a mother who was sick, and he asked me to help her get better."

"It's things like that, they can break your heart and at the same time make the job worthwhile."

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