



LEFT: LINDSEY PINKSTON pulls on his boots before beginning his day as Santa Claus for Gateway Mall.

BELOW: PINKSTON PULLS on his beard to complete his look as Santa Claus. Pinkston said he usually waits until 10 minutes before he starts his job at the mall to put on his beard because the synthetic hair is hot and makes it hard to breathe.



Here come Santa clones

BY SARAH BAKER
Assignment Reporter

Long lines of excited children wait in the center court of the mall, sitting in strollers or toddling around the thick velvet ropes, all of them eager for a few seconds with the man who knows whether they have been naughty or nice in the past 11 months.

With Christmas Eve only a few weeks away, children know it is essential to tell Santa Claus their want-lists to make sure the proper gifts are under the tree on Christmas morning.

But exactly who is that man behind the long, white beard and red suit who patiently sits in the mall, listening to seemingly endless lists of toys and holding children, some crying, on his knee for hours on end?

According to Jim Soucie, owner of Treasure Photo, these men are not just anyone.

"These are truly nice people, and they really love to do this job," Soucie said.

Treasure Photo, a nationwide company that employs more than 100 Santas, puts their employees through vigorous testing and training before they are

allowed wear the red fuzzy suit.

Treasure Photo employs the Santas at both Oakview Mall and Westroads Mall in Omaha.

"All of our Santas are tested for drugs, they go through background tests, and they are put through a Santa School, so they can learn how to act, and what to say to the children," he said.

Soucie said every Santa has different techniques when talking to children and in their costume appearance.

"About half of our Santas have real beards, but some still wear the false ones just for a better appearance," he said. "Most of our Santas are veterans, it is rare that we have to hire a new one because they all love the job so much."

Dan Brown, the Santa impostor at Gateway Mall in Lincoln, said this was his first year of putting on the suit.

"I love the kids," Brown said. "I basically do this for the fun of it. I love to see the thrill in the kids. Some bring me posters and lists of things they want. It is really enjoyable"

Brown said at Gateway Mall, Santa makes about \$6 per hour.

Brown has had some unusual experiences in his first year of playing St. Nick.

"I have four kids of my own, and three

grandkids who are young," Brown said. "My grandkids came to see me and they had no clue who was really behind the Santa costume."

Brown said dressing up as Santa is not 100 percent fun.

"This suit and beard are both awful hot," he said.

Michael Schwang, Santa at Westroads Mall in Omaha, has been dressing up every year since 1981.

"If you are in this job for the money, you are definitely in the wrong business," Schwang said.

Schwang has played the Shrine Santa in previous years, and also plays Santa for private parties.

"I'm the best," Schwang said with a smile.

Schwang has his own Santa suit, but he said the mall provides him with one when he is working there.

He said he sees about 50 to 80 children every hour while working his shift at the Westroads, depending on the day and time. This averages to about 500 children per day.

Schwang said his reason for dressing up every year is simple.

"The main reason I do this is to see the children smile."

said 2-year-olds are usually the most shy