



RICHARD LEHN, a 17-year veteran Santa, prepares for his annual job as a Gateway Mall Santa.

JOSH WOLFE/DN

Being Santa serious, fun

BY DEREK LIPPINCOTT
Staff writer

Children may wonder how Santa Claus can be in so many different places at the same time.

There is the one ringing the bell in front of the Salvation Army, one in the department store and, of course, one in virtually every shopping mall across America.

Children put so much stock into Santa Claus that the people who dress up in the red suits and the white beards take their jobs very seriously, said Richard Lehn, a Santa Claus at Gateway Mall, 61st and O streets.

"Anyone can put on a Santa Claus suit," Lehn said. "But you have to act real in front of kids because you're playing with those kids' beliefs."

Lehn's 17-year tenure at Gateway Mall is part of a holiday tradition. Each year the mall sets up a station that offers children a chance to sit on Santa's lap as well a chance for parents to take their own pictures or purchase professional pictures.

Proceeds of the pictures sold go to Smiles for Wishes, part of the Make-A-Wish Foundation for children with terminal illnesses.

Ron Smith, marketing manager of Gateway Mall, also said the service helps the mall financially.

"The set brings in some business, but it is more of a tradition," Smith said. "It used to be held in department stores, but now it is in the actual mall, so it brings in some more customers."

Gateway Mall employs its Santas through the national company Santa Plus. Theresa Clarke, Santa Plus location manager, said it takes a certain type of person to dress up as Santa Claus.

"They have to be enthusiastic guys," Clarke said. "They have to be good with children and overall jolly people with good attitudes."

Enthusiasm, a jolly spirit and a good attitude are traits Clarke said Lehn has mastered. Lehn takes pride in his job and takes it very seriously.

"Those kids believe in you," Lehn said. "You are the man. You have to be careful of what you say to them because they'll believe you."

Lehn said over his 17 years of being Santa, he has learned how to react to certain situations. He said many times children ask for unrealistic gifts.

"You can't go promising something that you know can't be delivered," Lehn said. "When kids are on your lap telling you what they want, you have to look at their parents. You have to look at their eyes, and they'll usually tell you if it's not possible."

The Santa Claus station at Gateway Mall started Saturday and lasts until Christmas Eve.

The newly opened mall SouthPointe Pavilions, 27th Street and Pine Lake Road, will also have a Santa Claus available starting Wednesday until Christmas Eve.



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DAN BROWN, a Gateway Mall Santa, holds 10-month-old Emah Maahs on Saturday, the opening day for the Santa station at Gateway Mall.


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