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With a real beard of white, a dandy red suit and a jolly personality, this man lives the part

There's a lot that goes into Santa: the twinkling eyes, the white hair and full beard, the big belly.

But it all comes down to the suit.

Just ask Jim Smith of Port Washington.

"There's something magical that happens when you put on the suit," he said.

"I am a different character when I put the suit on. I can feel it. I can't tell you what it is, but you feel like Santa."

Smith should know. For the past 14 years, he's been Santa Claus.

It's a role he was born to play, with his own white hair and beard and a belly that can shake like a bowlful of jelly.

Smith's Christmas tree is up throughout the year, as is his collection of Santa figures, and he listens to holiday music year-round.

"I like to keep it festive all year long," he said, laughing. "People think I'm nuts."

Even without the suit, he is often recognized as Santa.

"I'll be marching in a parade with the Veterans of Foreign Wars or American Legion, in uniform, and kids will yell, 'Look, it's Santa,'" Smith said. "I've had people follow me. Once in a while, you can't shake them.

"I've had parents come up to me in Costco and say, 'My child's name is so-and-so. Can you

just stop and say hi to him?'"

Last year, a pair of Cub Scouts selling popcorn outside a store recognized him when he walked in, sans suit, and asked, "Mister, are you Santa Claus?"

"I said to them, 'You boys just be good and at Christmas you'll know,'" Smith said.

It goes without saying that Smith embraces the role of Santa.

"It's very awesome," he said. "I love doing it. I do it 365 days a year.

"I love children. And there's nothing better than putting a smile on a kid's face. That's what it's all about, making people happy."

For Smith, Santa is an extension of his lifelong love of giving to others.

"I've always donated my time," he said. "I've always loved helping people and giving to others."

Smith first became Santa in California in 2002, when he decided to dress up for a holiday toy drive for the needy that he sponsored.

"It was a great success," Smith said. "We loaded up two semi trucks of toys. We had plenty of things to give to needy and homeless children."

Then his boss at Countywide Mechanical in El Cajon, Calif., noticed his resemblance to Santa Claus.

"At work one day, he said, 'You'd make one heck of a good Santa,'" Smith said.

They went to a uniform shop where Smith got his first Santa suit, complete with a fake beard — something he no longer needs.

"We went out on the road for one week straight, visiting customers and taking them candy canes," Smith said.

The magic of the suit took hold, and Santa became Smith's alter ego.

When Smith took a job as manager for mechanical services at Potawatomi Casino in Milwaukee and moved back to his hometown of Port Washington six years ago, Santa came, too.

Smith's boss asked him to be Pota-watomi's Santa, and he hosted 771 children there last Saturday for a breakfast with Santa.

One of the managers there often chats with children as they wait to visit Santa, then uses a

walkie-talkie to tell Smith, who wears an earpiece, the children's names.

"When I know their names before they get up there, it flabbergasts them," Smith said.

In addition to visits with Santa, Smith also presides over parades and tree lightings in Lannon and South Milwaukee, and was a finalist to be the Santa for the City of Milwaukee Christmas parade.

A Navy veteran, Smith does events for Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts and other charitable causes, and has numerous home visits lined up each year.

"I start Nov. 30 and I'm busy until the 25th of December," Smith said.

One thing Smith doesn't do is spend his time as Santa at malls.

"I do more fun things," he said. "I enjoy the family stuff."

During home visits, he generally delivers a toy to each child and reads a story before continuing his rounds.

This year, he has a Christmas Eve visit scheduled for a family whose two children don't believe in Santa any more.

"I'm going to walk in and drop off their toys so they can peek in and see me and believe again," he said.

At appearances, Smith gives children a candy cane and a coin that's inscribed "naughty" on one side and "nice" on the other.

He keeps the coins in a velvet bag his wife made him, and makes sure his pockets are always loaded with candy canes.

An ordained minister, Smith said he also offers weddings by Santa. While he's had a couple people renew their vows, no one has taken him up on a wedding.

"I thought I had one last year," Smith said. "He was all for it, but she said no."

Smith, who went to Santa School in California, attends Santa conventions and is a member of the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas, is also considering sending his photo to the Hallmark television channel to see if he can score a part on the network's many Christmas movies.

But for Smith, Santa is more than just business. It's family time.

His 23-year-old daughter Becky is his elf, accompanying him on many of his travels. Many people — Smith included — have told his wife Sandy she should dress as Mrs. Claus,

something she's on the fence about, and Smith is also trying to convince his son Scott to follow him in the business.

"He can grow a beard just like dad," Smith said. "Who knows, there might be a second generation Santa."

Even his grandson Oliver Smith knows he is Santa, Smith added.

"He calls me Grandpa Santa," he said.

Although Christmas hasn't arrived yet, Smith is already planning for next year.

He's already got some bookings, and is looking at some new fixtures. He bought a new throne this year, but it needs painting and reupholstering, and he's hoping to buy a sleigh that will provide the perfect backdrop for pictures with Santa.

Then there's the suit. Smith, who already has two of them, is considering purchasing another. He's got his eye on a longer coat, one that's more of a Father Christmas style, or perhaps one with buttons down the front, like the Coca-Cola Santa.

His 6-foot-long belt, which was handcrafted for him, will be festooned with bells and holly.

He's also eyeing a new glove, one with a fingertip that glows when you touch it to the tip of a child's nose.

"It's all about the suit," Smith said. "It's mythical."

Image Information: YOUNG SEAN JANDRE looked pensive as he considered a question from Santa Claus Jim Smith at the Van Ells-Schanen American Legion Hall in Port Washington Sunday. The 3-year-old was one of several dozen children to visit with Santa during the event. Photo by Sam Arendt