



Longtime Santa John Sullivan of Streamwood meets with a young fan dressed appropriately for the occasion.

## Jolly Old Souls

*Veteran Santas share the joys and challenges of playing the legendary holiday role*

**O**n Christmas mornings when Jeff Curtis was a little boy, he'd wake up, go downstairs and Santa Claus would be sitting in his living room waiting for him.

"When you're 4 years old or 8, that's the most normal thing in the world," says Curtis, whose father, Art Curtis, was Streamwood's Santa for 40 years. "Then you find out the truth and you're in awe of your dad. Then sometimes as you get older, you're embarrassed. Then when you turn 15 or 16, you're very proud."

But he never expected to step into his father's big black boots.

**"About 15 years ago, my dad said his knees were too bad to continue and he asked me if I wanted to do it,"** Curtis recalls. "I didn't think I did, but the first time I tried it, I fell in love."

The 58-year-old Bartlett resident took the reins his dad offered. Jeff learned from watching Art — whose cardinal rule was **"never ever under any circumstances ever promise a child anything, you don't know what the outcome is"** — and from attending the "International University of Santa Claus." The school taught Curtis everything from the history of Santa to the care of white hair and beards.

It didn't take long for him to warm to the role. "It's just an outright joy to do," says Curtis, whose wife, Carolyn, has taken on his mom's role of Mrs. Claus as well. "You get to talk to kids. There's nothing more fun than listening to a kid tell you about what they really, really want. Most Santas say the same thing, 'If we didn't get paid, we'd probably still do this job.' It's so much darn fun. When a 4-year-old girl

jumps up in your lap and says 'I've been waiting all year for this,' you just melt."

Though Curtis still works full-time as a "parts guy" for a heavy equipment company, the Santa job really is a year-round one. "You learn that if you're going to be Santa and have a real beard and you're at Jewel looking for detergent and dog food and someone says, 'Hi, Santa!' you've got to be aware," explains Curtis, who has presided over Chicago's Thanksgiving Day parade and tree lighting for the past six or seven years.

That reflex has become easier with time. **The hardest thing he ever did as Santa? "Being Santa in front of my dad."**

Playing Santa kind of fell into John Sullivan's lap. Out of work in 1990, he answered an ad to manage the photo operation for Charlestown Mall's Santa.

"The first season I hired six or seven

Santas. Some were good, some weren't so good. When a Santa didn't show up, I ended up being Santa," recalls Sullivan, 73, of Streamwood. "After a couple of seasons, I found I liked being Santa better than running the photo operation. I already had white hair and a beard!"

Part of the photo job was instructing the Santas. A rookie himself, Sullivan watched Santas who had previous experience. The rest he picked up on the job.

"In a mall situation, you learn it quickly: the kids come up all excited with their wants, and you listen. The cliches come pretty fast: 'Have you been good this year?' 'Are you helping Mom, cleaning your room?'"

Working as a mall Santa has its rhythms. Early in the season, boredom can be the biggest challenge, as few children arrive each shift during the week. Then after Thanksgiving, the crowds can be overwhelming.

"There's no time to breathe. A busy mall can be stressful," acknowledges Sullivan. "It doesn't end — you look at that line and it's all the way winding around. It never stops."

The 18-month-olds to 2-year-olds are generally terrified of Santa, but after that come the magic ages, up to 5 or 6 years old when kids are in awe of Santa, says Sullivan, who now also compiles the "Santa in Chicago" website, a seasonal listing of scheduled Santa appearances throughout the Chicago area.

**"Being Santa is probably the biggest ego-boosting, most gratifying thing you can ever do. When they come and see you, it's wonderful!** It really does something to you, little children coming up — and they're true believers — telling you what they want."

Not a lot has changed in Sullivan's 23 years in the chair — there is "always a new kind of Barbie and Lego." When boys ask for the latest in electronics, Sullivan tries to show enthusiasm, even when he has no idea what they are talking about. The strangest request from a child? A tarantula.

"He said he wanted a real tarantula! His mom is freaking out, standing behind him shaking her head. I said, 'Well, I don't know if you really want a tarantula running



around the house.' He told me he'd take good care of it! I told him the usual — Santa can't promise."

Then there are always the children who ask, "Are you really Santa?"

"The only way you can answer is, 'What do you think?' They'll say, 'I think you are!' **They want you to be Santa," says Sullivan. "To them, you're the most important person in the universe they could possibly meet.** That's the thing that gets to you and makes you want to be a Santa."

Doug White of Aurora had worked for a company whose motto could have been Santa's — "When it absolutely positively has to be there overnight." After seven years as a FedEx contractor, he went from delivering packages to people's homes to delivering presents.

With his year-round real beard, he'd don a Santa hat during the holidays, prompting customers to refer to him as Santa. "When I retired, I figured that had to be my calling. I had to be a Santa. I wasn't sure how to get started, so I went online and typed 'Midwest Santas' into a search engine." He found Dave Hoopes from Carpentersville, who invited him to the Northern Illinois Santa meeting and became White's mentor.

"His wife is a hairdresser, so she taught me what bleach to use and how to take care of my hair. He gave me ideas of where to buy a Santa suit — the gloves, the belt, the boots. Without some help, it's very difficult to find!"

"It's all about the wonderment in their eyes when they get to see Santa," says White, who has worked at Yorktown and this year

will be at Stratford Square, "the expression on their faces. I really enjoy the special needs children. They are just so full of love."

Though most children ask for the usual toys — and some arrive with an eight-page list, back and front — he is always inspired by the number of children who say they want nothing at all.

"Some are so full of love, they're not thinking of themselves," says White. "I had a boy who wanted his mom to have a very nice present because she had just lost her mom."

When Art Howells of LaGrange started playing Santa, he had to dye his hair. But that was nearly 30 years ago — his hair has since caught up to the role.

His friend Howard Orr had played Santa, but when Orr's wife fell ill, he asked Howells to fill in. "That's when the bug hit me," says the 77-year-old. "I was a draftee!"

His first regular job was for the Downtown Partnership of St. Charles. He also donates Santa services to many police and fire organizations, as well as libraries and other charitable groups.

**"The best part about the job is the group at the other end of the age spectrum — the kids," says Howells.**

One of those kids, however, got Santa Art into a little trouble one year as he mimicked the little boy holding the corners of his mouth open and sticking out his tongue — a newspaper photographer caught Santa in the act. The large photo was on the front page the next day.

He'd obviously taken to heart the wise words Orr left him: "Don't ever completely grow up — keep that little kid inside you alive and well. Always preserve that part of your personality that gets a buzz out of Christmas."

Howells gets just as much of a "buzz" out of the big hearts he has found in his little friends. "I've had a lot of little kids who ask for things for other people. I think to myself, boy, that's really remarkable," he says. "I run into a lot of cute little kids who have a better handle on the real charitable feeling of Christmas than a lot of adults I know."

- Joni Hirsch Blackman