

Christmas tree talks to children

By GAIL DeGEORGE

Four-year-old Thomas Keller of Troy didn't want to visit Maynard empty handed. So when he and his mother went to see the talking Christmas tree at Somerset Mall last week, Thomas brought a present: two drawings of Christmas trees he had made to hang on Maynard's limbs.

"That's my first Christmas present this year," said Maynard, who thanked the youngster.

Thomas' present is just one of the many reactions that children have to the talking Christmas tree, said Linn Smith, one of Maynard's voices.

"The kids are fun," he said. "Some are amused by it, others awed by it. The older ones know something's going on, but can't quite figure it out."

Linn was filling in for his brother, Kim, who was hired as this year's voice. Although he had only been a voice for a few days, he seemed to have the role of Maynard down fairly well.

Maynard and Mrs. Claus, played this year by Jeanne deGaj Wassell, a Birmingham resident, work as a team. Mrs. Claus attracts the children, gives them coloring books, and tells them about Maynard. "The little ones are a little overwhelmed by it," Ms. Wassell said.

She helps the children get over their initial shyness by having them

talk to the tree and shake Maynard's limb. The limb shaking is really tickling Maynard, she tells them, and the tree responds with an appropriate laugh.

MAYNARD EVEN has his own coloring book and story, which tells how he is able to talk. As a reward for sheltering animals and giving his pine cones to children, Santa crowned him and gave him the ability to speak. So every year, Santa brings Maynard with him to visit with the children on his annual trek from the North Pole.

The reaction from most parents and other adults is positive, said Ms. Wassell, adding that many see Maynard as a different direction of Christmas, without the religious overtones of St. Nick, or Santa Claus.

It's best when adults play along and don't try to discover Maynard's secret, she said.

Smith has noted that adults' reactions range from having fun with the talking tree, to "Scrooge-like reactions, some won't even turn their heads."

Andy Elbert, 9, wanted to know how several things about Maynard. "How do you get out of here when Christmas is over? I don't think you can get through the doors."

Maynard started to say something about being taken back to the basement, but Mrs. Claus interrupted and replied that Santa takes him back to the North Pole on the sleigh.



Kids are fascinated by the tree that talks to them at Somerset Mall.

ANDY ALSO wanted to know about the lights in Maynard's eyes, and the tree obligingly blinked his lights at him. The Pleasant Ridge youngster told Maynard he had been to see him last year as well, and

noted that the tree's beard had grown.

He also had a bit of advice for Maynard. "Next year, you should hide that camera a little more."

Pickup truck dunked

Gary Wiltshire of Pontiac Township said his 1973 GMC pickup suffered minor damage Monday when it rolled down an embankment and sank in a pond on Oakland University's Rochester area campus.

Wiltshire, who had the truck towed back to his home after the incident, said the engine turned over when he tried to start it, but a headlight must be replaced.

Wiltshire parked his truck in a lot on the south side of the pond, called Beer Lake, about 7:40 a.m. Monday.

He said he engaged the truck's emergency brake since the parking lot angled toward the pond.

About 30 minutes later he returned to see Pontiac Township Fire Department pulling his truck, by way of a tow truck and chain, from the pond.

"He was pretty bummed out about it, for sure," said investigator Mel Gilroy of the university's Department of Public Safety.

Gilroy said the parking brake apparently released.

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