

year-old who looked more like a department store model than a Santa Claus, was taken aback when asked if children should take him seriously in his role.

"I think I'm believable," he said firmly. "The important thing is to be an honest, friendly Santa."

Santas can't escape homework. They must watch television to know the latest trends in toys. They memorize the names of Santa's reindeer. And they practice belting out Santa's famous laugh.

This job is not for someone who has a meek, small voice. "We want loud Santas," Cates said.

THE JOB can be troubling. The Santas must be able to handle mentally and physically handicapped children and remain silent if they witness a parent striking a child.

"I once saw a mother who slapped her child, but you're not in a position to do anything about it," said Ken Henson, a computer systems manager. Henson signed up again this year after his role as Santa at the mall last year.

"You can only take the child and hug him and tell him that you love him. But you hurt inside," he said.

Santas are serious business for Studio Inc., which hopes to sell photographs to parents.

Her words of advice to Santas: Don't smoke. Don't drop the babies. Don't forget to turn your punch card in on time. And whatever you do, try not to take your eyes off the cash box.

One Santa in the Los Angeles area left his throne to chase a robber through a shopping mall. But Cates said Santa isn't expected to play cops and robbers.

"Don't be a hero," she warned.



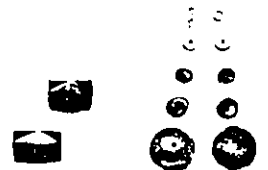
Bill Newman begins applying the makeup that will turn him into a department-store Santa Claus.

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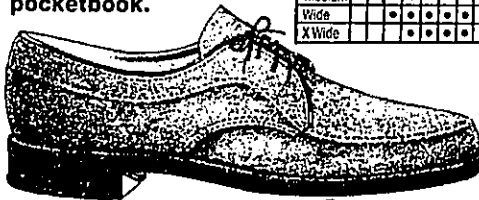
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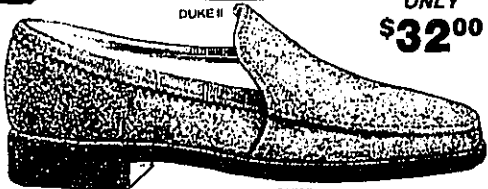
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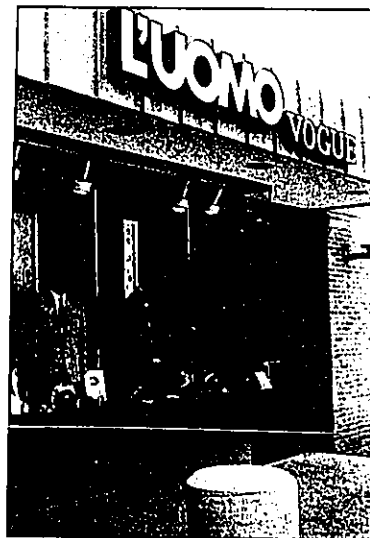


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