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Richard Lech, Suburban Life editor for the Livonia Observer, found out it takes more than some white eyebrows and a few ho-ho-ho's to sit on Santa's throne.

Some reflections on walking in Santa's big boots

By Richard Lech
staff writer

I ALWAYS wondered what it would be like to walk in Santa's boots.
Last week I found out. The folks at the Livonia Mall allowed me to play Santa for an hour-and-a-half at Santa's Workshop. I sat on Santa's throne, took little tykes on my knee and got the low-down on their Christmas wishes. I also let off plenty of hearty "ho, ho, hos."

It was jolly fun, all right. But it also was demanding. After all, the critics — the kids — either loved me or hated me. There was no middle ground.

LINDSEY HILL, 3, of Dearborn was one of those who liked my act. She hugged Santa as though he were an old friend and told him exactly what she wanted for Christmas.

But a sizable minority of the youngsters had an entirely different response — stark, raving fear.

Typical was little 18-month-old Echo Lee of Detroit. I asked in my best, coaxing Santa bass voice, "You're not afraid of old Santa, are you?" Yes, she was, absolutely. She refused to sit on my knee despite the bribe of a brand-new Santa coloring book.

Other kids would be set on my knee by their moms, slowly turn around to look at me and burst into tears, as though mom had thrust them upon the Frankenstein's monster or something. All the sweet talk in the world about reindeer, toys and the North Pole was to no avail.

SETTING UP my Santa appearance took some doing. First of all I had to make sure my union contract allowed me to do that kind of thing. A quick check showed there was no Santa clause. (Just joking there.)

After I arrived at the mall, mall marketing director Deborah Wanamaker took me to a back storage room where the Santa outfits are kept. Costuming posed a problem: I had the deep voice for Santa, but my brown hair and thin frame were not right for the part.

A wig, Santa cap and white eyebrow makeup took care of the hair. Some padding gave me a stomach that could shake like at least a small bowl full of jelly when I laughed.

Nonetheless, when I walked down a mall hallway, some wisecracker yelled, "Look at the skinny Santa Claus!" Fortunately that was after my appearance, not before, or my

confidence as Claus might have been shaken.

BEFORE GOING on, I asked veteran Livonia Mall Santa Henry Konrad of Livonia for some tips. Konrad, a retired postal employee, has been playing Santa for five years.

"There should be laughter all the time, because that's supposed to be a jolly place," he said.

"Don't force any kids on you if they don't want to come. The shy ones who are afraid to come up I try to warm up. A lot of times you can convince them to come up if you build them up, tell them, 'You're looking great today!'"

The older kids take special care, Konrad said. Santa has to test them with questions to see whether they're still true believers.

"You might get someone who doesn't believe and if you give them the believe routine, it doesn't work," he said.

Konrad also stressed the importance of the team. For Santa isn't alone on the throne, thank goodness. He has his helpers, who in my case were Colleen Sullivan of Livonia and Kimberly Oboza of Westland.

Dressed in bright Christmas green, they prepared the youngsters for their visit, got their names for Santa, took a photograph for those who wished to buy one, even helped prop up youngsters who were slipping and sliding out of Santa's lap.

They smoothed the wrinkles out of playing Kris Kringle.

IN MY full Santa outfit, complete with spectacles, I was transformed from anonymous, mild-mannered reporter to a celebrity.

Wide-eyed little kids would wave as I walked by. Even older shoppers would wave and shout, "Hi, Santa Claus!" Now I knew how Sean Penn and Madonna must feel.

At first I thought I would write down in my reporter's pad everything the youngsters requested. But that proved difficult. Much of the time my conversation with the kids went like this:

"What do you want for Christmas?"

"A bobba googa dadda wadda doo-da."

"Pardon?"

"A bobba googa dadda wadda doo-da."

After a while I decided there wasn't much point in asking them to repeat anything.

FOLLOWING Konrad's advice, I asked many of the kids if they had

been good.
"Have you kept your bedroom nice and clean?" I asked one little girl.

"Wellllll," she said. "I was going to clean it up tomorrow."

Most of the kids were a little shy, but seemed to enjoy sitting in Santa's lap. A few just sat there and didn't say anything, even when Santa asked them what they wanted for Christmas. I didn't blame them. I guess I'd be left speechless too.

But my worst fear was never realized. No one tried to pull off my beard. It would have been difficult to do anyway since the beard's string was attached to the top of my head.

When it was over I went back to the storage room, took off the Santa outfit and washed off my rosy-red cheeks makeup as best I could.

Then I was heard to exclaim, o're I drove out of sight, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"



Santa checks his list again and again in trepidation, waiting for his first group of visitors.

Staff photos by Steve Fecht



Santa's helper, Kimberly Oboza (left), and Livonia Mall marketing director Deborah Wanamaker pad the skinny Santa to help him fulfill his role.



Santa's heart was racing just as fast as Lindsey Hill's when the 3-year old, one of his first visitors, climbed up on his lap.



The neophyte Santa takes a crash course from the real Santa Claus, a Livonia Mall veteran for the season, Henry Konrad.