



**Decked out:** Julie Barnhard is a pro at being Mrs. Santa Claus. Annually she attends Santa School in Midland. The school offers a three-day seminar that makes all the wonder of both Mr. and Mrs. Claus come to life.

# Transformation

## Santa's better half makes the rounds for the holidays

BY BARD PEIT TEMPLETON  
STAFF WRITER

**W**hen Julie Barnhard dons a white wig and apron, a red dress, red boots, lace pantaloons and Christmas bells she's nearly transformed into Mrs. Claus. The final touch is the wedding ring. That's a detail all the children she meets look for right away.

"If I'm Santa's wife I better have that ring on," smiled Barnhard, 35, who has been taking on the Mrs. Claus persona for four years now. "I'm what is called a 'kitchen Claus' because I wear the apron."

Barnhard, who is employed by AAA in Farmington Hills, has entertained her co-workers as Mrs. Claus and works holiday parties across the area dressed as the popular Christmas character.

"I think this is an extension of myself and I always loved Christmas," Barnhard said. "I look at the children and love to see the wonder and awe in their eyes."

Noting that Mrs. Claus is a more versatile character than her husband, Barnhard enjoys the fact that she can add less traditional trappings to her performance like face painting and magic tricks.

Credit for her excellent transformation goes to a special school she attends each October in Midland. Santa School, is a three-day seminar that makes all the wonder of both Mr. and Mrs. Claus come to life.

"The school is fantastic," Barnhard said. "We do all kinds of

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*Julie Barnhard*  
—Mrs. Santa Claus

things, like Santa and Mrs. Claus learn to interact together even dancing. We also learn how to deal with hearing impaired and special needs kids."

The unique school is the oldest Santa School in the world. It spawned the first-ever Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade Santa.

Tom and Holly Valent have operated the school for 10 years and love every detail. Tom Valent went to Santa School in New York years ago before the school was moved first to Bay City and eventually to Midland. He has been the local Santa for 22 years and constructed elaborate wooden sleighs and reindeer for a downtown display.

The couple hosted 60 students during this year's class and their prestigious reputation brought in students from Switzerland, Australia and England.

The curriculum includes a history of St. Nicholas, customs around the world, different Santa legends, make-up, dress, Christmas songs, singing and dancing. About 25 percent of the students enrolled are there to become Mrs. Claus.

"It's really a lot of fun and I'm to the point now where I'm helping behind the scenes a lot," Barnhard said. "There were

three new Mrs. Claus' this year and they were petrified. But at the end one of them cried because she had such a great time."

Reservations for the class are booked months in advance and the cost is \$235 a week. Participants provide their own lodging at local hotels but the cost includes three dinners.

"We only take 15 new students a year so most of our students are repeat visitors," Mrs. Valent said. "Actually, we're really a secret. We don't advertise for new students and very few people know about us."

"I feel if it's a true Santa he'll find our school," she added.

Barnhard, who also performs as a clown, is certainly glad her friends told her about the Santa School. She feels Mrs. Claus is finally starting to come into her own now with children and sometimes having Santa along side her isn't a must.

"I have lots of repeat business each year and most of it's for private families who hire me to come in and be with the children," Barnhard said. "And for kids who are just on the verge of not believing, you can kind of grab them and pull them back for another year. That's what I love."

### MILITARY NEWS

Roger Berry II, son of Roger and Mary Berry of Farmington Hills, enlisted in the Air Force's Delayed Entry Program on Dec. 8.

Berry, a 1997 graduate of North Farmington High School, is scheduled for enlistment in

the regular Air Force on Dec. 29. Upon graduation from the Air Force's six-week basic training course in San Antonio, Texas, he is scheduled to receive technical training as a precision measurement equipment laboratory apprentice.

He will earn credits toward an associate degree in applied sciences through the Community College of the Air Force while attending basic and technical training schools.

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