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**m.m.memos**



By MARGARET MILLER

**Melodious voice goes out on a limb**

By VIVIAN BYRD

Maynard the Magnificent is not your ordinary 12-foot Christmas tree. Oh, he is gaily decked out with shiny red, blue and green ornaments like other Christmas trees. And bright red-and-white wrapped packages tied with red ribbons set underneath him.

He even wears strings of sparkling electric lights on his broad evergreen branches. But there the resemblance ends.

In his difference from other trees, Maynard is able to peer out from under a long white beard, and see those who look at him. And when he sees someone, he talks.

As he tells the many awed children who stop by to chat with him, Maynard lives just outside Santa's workshop at the North Pole.

When Santa saw Maynard giving shelter to birds and small animals during snowstorms and sharing his cones with his human friends, he decided Maynard would be perfect for a very special job.

So Santa loaded Maynard onto his sleigh, dropped him off at Somerset Mall, and instructed him to find out what children want for Christmas.

Maynard is helped in his job by Christmas Carol, who encourages children to talk with Maynard.

Tiffany Jordan, 3, of Clawson, stood zipping her blue jacket up and down. "Are you getting ready for Christmas?" Maynard asked.

Speechless, she nodded.

"Is there something you might like for Christmas?", he coaxed.

She whispered her answer to Christmas Carol, who related it to Maynard. "A Superstar Barbie."

"Anything else?"

She whispered again to Carol. "A dollhouse."

Tiffany stood there, brown eyes wide, staring at him until her mother urged her to say good-bye.

In front of Maynard, made a sawing motion with an index finger and whispered, "Cut, cut," to indicate what he wanted.

"He wants a saw," his mother translated.

A few feet away, four children hesitated, each urging the others to go up and talk to Maynard.

"Nobody wants to come up and talk to me, Carol," Maynard said sadly.

Carol asked one of the youngsters his name.

"Casey is here, Maynard."

"Hello, Casey, how are you? Would you like to come up and talk to me, Casey?" Maynard asked.

Casey chose not to and ran away with his friends, giggling.

Red-haired Jason, 6, twisted a finger through a belt loop, chewed his lip, and nodded nervously to Maynard's questions.

"Is there something you might like for Christmas? You can tell me. I'm good friends with Santa and I can put in a good word for you with him."

Jason whispered he likes talking to the groupies, too. However, they usually ask for expensive gifts, like boats, or an airplane, a mink coat or a million dollars. "Things that Santa can't bring on a sled."

"I'll tell Santa everything you told me," Maynard told Jason.

"Trevor, a confident five-year-old who didn't waste words, said he wanted "Just toys."

under our Christmas tree?" they asked, glaring at the offending velvet.

"Yes, don't you think it will look nice? It will match the pillows."

"Get it out of here," one said. The other disagreed.

OK, OK, the old skirt stays. Really I didn't know you were so attached to it. Christmas traditionalists will be, even to the greying tree skirt with its decorations falling off.

Jill Leeming, 6, of Birmingham, was awestruck, but not shy. Soon she forgot her surroundings and accepted the fantasy.

"What's in the presents?" she asked.

"I'll find out on Christmas Day," he said. "What do you want for Christmas?"

"A doll house and a stapler to staple things."

"And a mother and father to go into the dollhouse and a little boy and a little girl."

Eric Leeming, 7, told Maynard the tree was already up at his house.

"Is it as nice as I am," Maynard asked.

"It's shorter. It's pink and doesn't have eyes and a red nose," he said.

"I'm exclusive as far as trees go," Maynard said. "I'm magnificent."

Six-year-old Renee, told Maynard she had already seen Santa and had put up her tree, too.

"Is your tree as pretty as I am?"

Renee scratched her head and said, "You're both the same but you don't look the same—our tree doesn't talk."

A 10-year-old boy walked around Maynard, searched his branches and cried out triumphantly. "I found the communication."

"Don't tell the little kids," said Christmas Carol. "They think he's real."

Undeterred, he approached Maynard and demanded, "What's your address?"

"I just live outside Santa's workshop."

"I mean, what's your street number?"

"There's no number, it's just the North Pole."

The boy left unconvinced. He had seen the camera and it he was too old to believe all that Christmas stuff.

But most youngsters do believe once they hear the voice of Gary Strong, 21, of Farmington Hills. A music and theater major at Oakland Community College, Strong became Maynard's voice after working at the Somerset Dinner Theatre. Jimmy Launce, who operates the theatre, recommended Strong for the job as Maynard.

Strong works from a remote control booth with a camera, headset and microphone.

"I can see and hear everybody, but I can only hear one kid at a time. When I can't hear what the kids are saying, Carol repeats it for me," he said.

"One little kid came up to me crying his eyes out. I talked to him about five minutes and then he didn't want to leave. He waved good-bye to me about 20 times."

Blonde and mustached, with lively brown eyes, Strong said he gets lots of requests to go home with kids.

"Part of the fun of this job is that you can go into the fantasy. Christmas is all a fantasy, all in one's imagination. The little ones just stand there with their hands in their mouths. But some of the kids could talk for a half-hour."

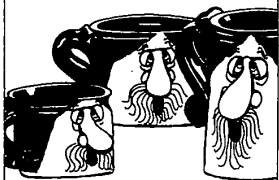
Strong said he likes talking to the groupies, too. However, they usually ask for expensive gifts, like boats, or an airplane, a mink coat or a million dollars. "Things that Santa can't bring on a sled."

"They seem to get a kick out of it though. They walk by and say 'hello' and we talk."

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