



with Santa Dan

BY ANN M. BAUER



I WAS STANDING IN LINE at Byerly's in St. Louis Park last spring when my 9-year-old daughter poked me, pointed at a man standing at an adjoining register, and hissed, "Look, Mom, it's Santa Claus!"

I was mortified, hoping the bearded gent in Bermuda shorts hadn't heard her. So he had a sloped belly and bright, twinkly eyes. Surely he must get tired of kids following him and calling him Santa.

I couldn't have been more wrong. "Ssshhh." He put one finger to his mouth and winked. "I'm just here on vacation. But I'll be going back to the North Pole to check on the elves very soon."

Then he reached into his pocket and handed my daughter two pieces of candy, gave a nod and a quick "Ho, ho, ho," and swept through the sliding glass doors with his bag of groceries.

Turns out what we had was a Santa Dan sighting—hardly unusual in the Twin Cities. He appears at

Southdale for six weeks every holiday season. But unlike other mall Santas, Dan stays in character year-round. In fact, he's lived the part every day since November 1997, when this formerly mild-mannered factory rep suddenly found himself retired, sporting a long, white beard, and exerting a previously untapped star power.

How did you get your start as Santa?

All of a sudden, when I retired and grew my own beard, the kids in the neighborhood started calling me Santa. And I thought that was all right. All my life, I'd been, "Hey you, fat boy!" and now I was loved by kids who didn't know me from Adam. So come Christmas season, I went to the Burnsville Center and applied. From there, I went to Rosedale. And since 2002, I've been at Southdale.

Did you have any special qualifications?

Other than the beard and my own belly, I went to school at Lutheran Bible Institute in Seattle when I was 18, and I didn't end up becoming a pastor back then. But now, doing this, I feel like I sort of am. And I delivered flowers for Chicago Floral for 20 years, on and off, which is about as close to being Santa as you can get. Also, I have a great wife, a perfect Mrs. Claus, who makes all my clothes and cooks wonderful meals that keep me Santa-sized.

What's the best part of the job?

No question, when the little kids come running at me with their arms open and give me a hug. Unconditional love is what I get, and that's everywhere I go, all year. I just act the part 24 hours a day and everyone pays attention. All my grandkids love to go out with me in public because it's like being with a movie star.

Is there a downside?

It's hard when a child comes up and says, "Santa, would you get me a winter coat?" and his body odor is terrible and his coat is all ragged. Then the little brother comes up and says he wants mittens. And the little sister comes up and wants boots that zip up. Or a teenager will say,

THE IN BOX

OUT	IN
gizzards	blizzards
lip service	Chapstick
Minnesota nice	Minnesota ice
letters to Santa	instant messaging Santa
blogs	nogs
blind dates	stuffed dates
missile launchers	mistletoe
fake tans	fake trees
fishnets	stockings
cash	cashmere
gift bags	wrapping the damn thing
red-nosed reindeer	designated lead reindeer
<i>Miracle on 34th Street</i>	<i>Bad Santa</i>
psychiatrists	nutcrackers
Cindy Lou Who	Cyndy Brucato

"My mom is dying of cancer. Can you help me?" It breaks my heart.

What do you do when these things happen?

When a child tells me someone they love is dying, I say, "I can pray for you. That's all anyone can do. But I know Jesus and it's his birthday we're celebrating and I know he loves you, too." The one thing I haven't quite figured out is how to deal with the child in need who's right there in front of me. I want to start some sort of Santa fund to take care of those kids. My greatest wish is that somehow I could hand each of these kids a gift certificate and say, "Here, this is from Santa Dan. Please go to the JCPenney store, or wherever, and get what you need."

Does the commercialization of Christmas ever get you down?

When kids start to get greedy, I get concerned. I've instituted a policy at Southdale that if kids come to me with a computer-generated list, I flatly turn them away. I say, "I only accept lists of five items or less. Come back when you've whittled that down." **MM**