

'Polar Express' delights kids as it chugs through S. Shore

By Susan Wood and Kathryn Reed

Hear those bells? Then you are a believer.

Ty Loughlin not only believes in Santa Claus, he has lived the Polar Express story. A year ago he tied the silver bell to his backpack – but it disappeared. Because the 8-year-old boy's family owns the book and movie he knew somehow it would turn up – with or without a hole in his pocket as the main character had in the story.

He found his bell in time for the second annual Polar Express on Dec. 5 as he got dressed in the afternoon in his snowboarder pajamas. And just in case he had not found his bell from 2009, Santa had plenty of shiny new ones to hand out.



Children surround Mrs. Claus as she reads "Polar Express."
Photos/Kathryn Reed

Hundreds of South Shore children boarded the Polar Express on Sunday to be whisked to the North Pole for a dose of Christmas

magic. The signature event of the Festival of Trees and Lights wrapped up the three-day fund-raising event for the Barton Community Clinic.

Some kids admitted to having been in their PJs all day. It was the preferred outfit – even for many adults. One father of three in a purple robe getting refreshments said he wished he could dress this way for work every day.

Also aboard the Dancer train car (which closely resembled a big yellow school bus) was Ralston Johnson. The South Lake Tahoe lad, who was born weighing in at an equivalent weight (9.2 pounds) as the elevation (9,200 feet) of the significant peak on the South Shore that he is named after, knew who the star of the day would be. His eyes lit up when asked what he would ask Santa for – a Blackhawk 2 Nintendo game.

He stood up in his polar bear pajamas and said so at the urging of conductor John Marchini, who donned a train conductor uniform and gold pocket watch.

“Doesn’t he look like Tom Hanks?” Ralston’s grandmother Louise Mitchell whispered. The actor played the lead role in the 2004 movie. Marchini had the role down to a science as he kept the bus entertained.

Buses with famous names like Vixen, Dasher, Prancer and Dancer left the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Complex at 3pm and 6pm, with a stop at the Red Hut Café on Ski Run where elves brought hot cocoa on board for all to sip.

Jude Stackpole, 7, sat with 5-year-old brother Jake for the second year in a row. Jude’s favorite part is the hot cocoa. Last year the Stateline family (dad Patrick was sitting in front of them) boarded the buses in Nevada.

An only-in-ski-country line was overheard describing the Tumbleweed Gymnastics performance in the parking lot of the Red Hut – “the aerialists” is the phrase that was used – much

like what these girls see in terrain parks.

Continuing along Highway 50 the bus didn't go the most direct route to the North Pole. It kept with the storyline by skirting the lake. (An exciting scene in the movie shows the train riding its tracks over a large body of water.)

Despite it being his first time, Ralston looked quite at home at the North Pole's Festival of Trees at MontBleu in Stateline. His school, Sierra House Elementary, won first place for the best decorated tree with the Peace Tree, which included a peace sign at the tree topper.

Paul Kushner and his Tahoe Belles choir kept the holiday mood going with songs that young and old could sing along to.

As Mrs. Claus read the "Polar Express," children clamored onto the stage to be close to her in an impromptu way only children can get away with.

Her "husband" was certainly the star of the event – especially because he ordered each child get a silver bell. The significance of which is revealed in the book.

Although the event was designed for the young, there were moments when it was hard to tell who was having more fun – the children or adults.

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