

Santa Claus – it's not just a seasonal nickname

By Linda Conaboy

Maybe you're among the millions who no longer believe in Santa Claus. But think about those vivid memories of all those years your parents persuaded you to be nice instead of naughty, ensuring a visit from the man in red at Christmastime – and you, being good little girls and boys, did your very best to comply.

When did you finally lose faith in Santa Claus, officially becoming one of the knowing, big kids?

Well, listen up non-believers. There is a Santa Claus. Really. He's the real deal. He's alive and well and he lives at the North Shore of Lake Tahoe. His hair is genuine and so is his ample girth, although he says he's been trying to lose a few pounds to show kids that obesity isn't such a good lifestyle.



Santa gets an earful from all ages at Heavenly Village in South Lake Tahoe.

Photo/Nina

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Who is this person who calls himself Santa? He's the very

Irish Mr. Thomas Patrick O'Connor, now 65, who became Santa Claus on the eve of St. Patrick's Day in 2005 when he legally changed his name to Mr. Claus. Why? Because he decided he could do the greatest good for the greatest number of children with an official name change.

Santa said he rarely entertains children at Christmastime anymore, but ideally spends most of the year advocating for millions of kids.

"Often, I try to convince legislators to support legislation that will benefit children," he said.

In real life, Santa is a Christian monk who believes that the greatest gift one can give is love.

"I aim to help restore America's heart and soul, primarily by reminding legislators, parents, caregivers and educators that a country's morality can be measured by how it treats its most vulnerable, especially children," Santa said.

With this in mind, he no longer spends much time dressed in his red suit. However, he says, when he began his Santa role, he served more than 30 nonprofits in that capacity; however, as time went on, he said his philosophy altered.

"I'd like to change children's perception of Santa Claus," he said. "For example, I believe that Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ, not the crass, commercial, secular spectacle it has become in many places. I believe that the greatest gift one can give is love, not presents."

Santa said he rarely gets paid for his now rare Santa gigs, but when he does occasionally receive remuneration, the funds support his child advocacy and ministry work.

"I don't think children or anyone else should have to pay to see or spend time with Santa – any Santa," he told *Lake Tahoe News*. "When I appear, I never charge children or parents;

however, they are welcome to pay a photographer to take their photo or use their own camera or cell phone for free.”

For his appearance at Heavenly Village in the giant snowglobe through Dec. 31, he will be paid by the village as will the photographer.

His beard, he said, is authentic, growing at least an inch each month.

“I trim it about every three months. If I had let it grow, without cutting it, since 2005, it would be longer than I am tall,” Santa, who stands 5-feet-10, said.

Because he serves as a child and peace activist most of the year, he said his apparel of choice now is blue jeans and a red shirt along with his snowy white beard. Red, white and blue, he said – very American.

In keeping with his activism, this year he ran for president of the United States. His platform was to restore American’s heart and soul.

“My candidacy was recognized by the Federal Election Commission and 15 states,” Santa said.

In addition, he writes eBooks, his latest being “The Santa Diet”, a complete regimen for physical, emotional and spiritual health.

Surprisingly, before he became Santa Claus, when he was still just plain Tom O’Connor, Santa served as a law enforcement and public safety administrator in New York City. Specifically, he was the special assistant to the deputy police commissioner in New York City as well as the chief of safety and security for the U.S. Virgin Islands Port Authority.

His best Santa story, he said, is that of a young girl who visited him with her mother in a church setting, about Christmastime.

“When she wondered why I hadn’t asked her what she wanted for Christmas, I told her I was more interested in what she planned to give someone else. She replied that she didn’t have any money to buy anything,” Santa said. “So, I assured her that the greatest gift she could give was love. She thought about that for a moment and asked me if I could help her mother stop smoking so they could enjoy a long life together. I smiled and called her mother over and related her daughter’s wish, asking the mother if she would at least try.

“She nodded, and they left. The following year, they both visited again and were pleased to let me know that the mother had stopped smoking altogether. She loved her mother enough that she didn’t want to lose her; and her mother loved her enough to overcome a destructive habit and create a better environment for both of them. So, there was an example of the gift of love they shared with each other. Simple, but profound.”

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Note: Santa will be in the Heavenly Village every day through Dec. 31 from 2-7pm.