

Being Santa is best part of Christmas for Hipsher

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With just a few days to go before his Christmas journey, Santa Claus is watching who is being good and who will go on the naughty list. Neil Hipsher becomes Santa each year at events throughout Hardin County and hears wish lists from children at the caboose outside the courthouse.

In late November each year, Neil Hipsher puts on his bright red suit, pulls on his boots and becomes Santa Claus. The transformation from a retired Rockwell employee to the spirit of Christmas is instant. Walking along the Kenton streets with the Dunkirk resident in costume is an experience in itself. Truck drivers roll down the windows of their 18-wheelers and call out to Santa Claus. Total strangers drive by and blow their horn as their children's eyes light up with holiday excitement.

In the suit, Hipsher doesn't "play" Santa. He is St. Nick and he doesn't disappoint those who seek recognition from him. "I had a boy just today come up to me and say, 'You're not the real Santa Claus.' So I let him jingle my sleigh bells and he changed his mind," said Hipsher with a Santa-sized belly laugh.

Santa Claus has been a part of Hipsher's life since he was a child and his parents, who are now both about 90 years old, instilled in their son a love of the jolly old elf. "That was a strong thing for me growing up," he recalled. Hipsher wanted to give his own children and grandchildren the same appreciation for the Christmas tradition.

But it was 10 years ago, when a friend, Tom Eibling, approached Hipsher about helping out with some Santa duties in the area, that Hipsher first put on the suit. It changed his life, he said. His first suit was not up to the standards he expected, Hipsher recalled. His wife, Beth, who is a teacher at Head Start, invited him in to meet her class as Santa. The suit passed, but when Hipsher was invited to welcome in the Christmas season in the Kenton Lions Club parade, both he and Beth agreed it was time to take his appearance up a notch.

"Beth said, 'If you are going to do Kenton, you need to look good,'" he said.

The couple searched for the bright, red suit he now wears with the flowing white beard and wig. "The boots and belt are the hardest thing to get," he said. "But the suit wasn't all that expensive."

Hipsher's booming voice also is a selling point to children and parents. "I need to work on my ho-ho-ho. I don't do that too well," he admitted. In recent years, Hipsher has been Santa at schools, businesses and returns each year for the Dunkirk Winterfest, where he is joined by Elf Earl Rice in hearing the wish lists of children.

"The first thing that people ask me is how much do I charge? I could care less about the money. That's not in the equation. This is something I do for the kids," said Hipsher.

The reward, he said, is the smile on the faces of the children. Over the years there have been some children sit on his lap who have made him laugh out loud and others who have tugged at his heart. Hipsher recalled one young girl who had shared what she wanted to find under the tree on Christmas morning and before he lifted her to the floor, Hipsher asked her if her house had a chimney.

"Yes, we do, Santa," the girl responded. "Is it big enough that I can climb down it?" asked Santa. "Oh, yes." she said. "It's big enough for that." "What if I get stuck in your chimney?" The little girl looked at her parents and then seriously looked at Hipsher and replied, "If you get stuck, Santa, I think you're totally screwed."

Hipsher recalls another visit a year ago when a family braved the cold weather to visit him at the Winterfest in Dunkirk. The child climbed up on his lap and said all she wanted for Christmas was a coat. "For as cold as it was, she didn't have much on," said Hipsher. "When children ask for something, I try not to assure them they will get it. I looked at her mom and dad on their cell phones and said, 'Santa will see what he can do.' That was sad."

There also was a recent 89-year-old woman who sat on his lap at Dunkirk. Hipsher's life-long friend whispered in his ear she was dying and wasn't sure she would see him next Christmas. "I told her I didn't want to hear that, but to enjoy the rest of her life and she gave me a big kiss."

The children this year have been amazing, said Hipsher.

"This is the best year I've ever had. The kids are wonderful," he said.

The younger ones might cry and hesitate to sit on his lap, but there also are his regulars who come back year-after-year to see Santa at the caboose at the courthouse.

The highlight of the Christmas season for Hipsher comes with the Lions Club parade in Kenton. He is amazed at the way the night parade has grown.

"Kenton should be proud of their parade and the windows are beautiful," he said. "I don't have enough arms to wave at all the kids. They stopped the wagon I rode in on the north side of the square and asked me to walk to the caboose (on the square's west side). I said, 'OK, but if the kids get on my legs, I may have to walk with them.' The children crowd around me and that is the part I like the best."

It has been a rewarding year for Hipsher in many ways, he said. His hope of instilling a love for Santa in his children and grandchildren has apparently taken root. "One of my grandsons is a senior this year and he told me, 'You know grandpa, I might do this, too,'" said Hipsher. "That meant a lot to me."

After Sunday night, the suit will go into storage and Hipsher will continue the life he lives in the off-season. But, he said, Santa won't be far from his thoughts. "That is the best part of Christmas," he said.