



Thompson, Taitel keep Santa alive

By Greg Hough
Emerald Contributor

It's the grand illusion of early childhood: A big bearded man in a red suit arrives on your roof, transported by a sleigh pulled by eight (or nine) flying reindeer, and proceeds to come down your chimney and pull from his sack some toys to put under your Christmas tree.

The whole Santa Claus story gets pretty fishy after age five or so, but for awhile it's a pretty entertaining game for kids, not to mention for the parents who help perpetuate the Santa myth.

In Eugene, it's up to people like Kim Thompson and Ben Taitel to help moms and dads keep the Santa story credible. They are both playing the role of Santa Claus this holiday season; Taitel is at the downtown mall and Thompson at Valley River Center.

"Every year I keep saying I'm not going to do it again, but I do," Thompson said. "After this year, though, I really think I'll give it a rest. It's fun, but bending down all day to raise kids up to your lap really gets you in the back. People think you don't get tired, but you do."

Taitel is in his second year of playing Santa downtown. As an actor/director who's been involved with a number of local theatrical productions, he approaches the role of St. Nick as a thespian would.

"It doesn't take much psychological preparation before I go on," Taitel said. "I think just putting on the costume begins the transformation. By the time the beard goes on, I look in the mirror and I don't see me anymore, I see Santa Claus. So it's easy to get into character."

Once a child is on Thompson's lap, he will ask them questions, finding out their name, what they would like for Christmas, what they did this morning, and so on.

"The kids ask a lot about the reindeer," Thompson said. "The only specific one they ask about is Rudolph. They also want to know where the reindeer are."

"I try to give each child as much time as they want," Taitel said. "Usually if you get them between four and six years old, they still believe in me, so I don't have to do as much explaining."

Neither Taitel nor Thompson had any formal training to play Santa, and Taitel says it's just as well he wasn't trained.

"The main thing is, you need a feeling for children," Taitel said. "You need to be empathetic with them."

Thompson and Taitel each told of similar items kids are asking Santa for this year. They said many kids want Nintendo video games.

"The girls still like the Barbies — they're asking more for the accessory kits more than the dolls themselves," Thompson said. "The boys still want the (Teenage Mutant) Ninja Turtles. That's the norm, but we get the occasional odd request — one boy, about 13 or so, wanted two high-powered hunting rifles."



Photo by Andre Ranieri

At Valley River Center, Santa, Kim Thompson keeps the tradition alive and well for an unidentified child.

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