

SANTA

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what Christmas means to them. Christmas is a magical moment for kids, and though Santa is the mystical Christmas person, he's down to earth and real to them because he knows them, cares for them, listens to them and, more importantly, understands them and their needs.

"I love what I do. I love talking with children, making them happy, seeing them smile and their faces light up. I wouldn't trade this for anything in the world," he added.

But it's not easy to talk with someone if you can't relate or reach out to them — especially when Santa's fans are not only children, but teenagers, adults and even the elderly.

"We were all kids once, and no one ever quite loses their feel for Santa and what he meant to them when they were children. I reach out to both the young and not-so-young by tapping into the child in them," said Santa, who recalled a time when an 80-year-old woman came up to him for a chat and they ended up talking about her childhood.

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— Santa Claus

Once, he let a blind girl feel his beard, his face and his clothes to give her a mental vision of who Santa really is and to let her know that "he is there for her."

"Doing what I do, I get to know all kinds of people through the generations and what in life is important to them, and I relate to them through that knowledge," he said. "I wouldn't talk about the same things to a teen-ager and someone in their forties, for example, and people appreciate it when someone understands them."

Now that he's at the mall everyday, thousands of kids, teen-agers and parents wait in line to chat with Santa and, inevitably, he gets many requests for gifts.

"With tons of presents to come up with, I



Santa Claus discusses life at the North Pole with a local youngster.

Photo by John Stoops

don't want to make any loose promises to the kids or let them down, so I just tell them that I'll do the best I can to get what they want, and if things don't work out, would they settle for another gift," he said. "Usually they appreciate it when I'm honest."

If you want to meet Santa or take a picture with him, you can catch him during mall hours at Valley River Center and Gateway Mall until Dec. 24, when he has to head home to get ready for his big night.

—Ming Rodrigues

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