

## Holiday Traditions



Photo by Dylan Coulter

Valley River Center's Santa Claus said he tries to "keep the warm feeling of Christmas alive."

# Santa's In Town

Amid the department stores and passersby in Valley River Center sits an old man on a chair for hours on end. Some people wave at him, and some just stare. A few have even been known to cry.

The man is Santa Claus, a gentle soul with a generous heart and a jolly belly that welcomes one and all to abandon shopping for awhile and sit on his lap for a chat.

"They're always excited to see him," said Judy Sebastian, while watching her children Sara, 7, and Gregory, 6, sit on Santa's knees and tell him their wishes.

Sara, who asked for a "crying doll," likes Santa because "he gives everyone toys." Gregory, who asked for "lots of candy," said he likes Santa simply because "he's nice."

But it wasn't just the young who got into the act. Steve Albrich, 49, and Ray Marsh, 53, of Corvallis, much to the amusement of shoppers, sat on either knee of Santa and posed for a picture.

Marsh planned to give his picture to his three granddaughters. Albrich said with a laugh, "We posed because it's Christmas, and we believe in Santa, but the picture is just a lark."

For whatever the reason that people are drawn to Santa, Mr. Claus sits and sits listening to each person's reasons — sometimes for six or seven hours at a time. But Santa doesn't mind.

"I could take a break if I wanted to, but I don't want to," Santa said. "I love kids, I enjoy waving to people, and I enjoy just sitting here, watching and meeting people."

Santa has had many unusual experiences with children sitting on his lap over the years.

"Oh yeah, they go to the bathroom on your lap," he said. "You just act like it didn't happen. I just keep talking to them. If they're sitting on one side, then after they leave I move the next child to the other side. Then I go home at night and wash. But that's the key — I don't act like it bothers me."

"Many of the kids become so

excited because they view Santa's presence as magical," said Pat Havice, owner of Santa's Magic, a small business he has run during the holiday season for many years.

Although Havice receives modest profits from the photos taken at the mall, he said the money is not the reason he operates the business.

"We try to create the warm feeling of Christmas and bring Santa alive," he said.

The line of children eagerly waiting to see Santa proves that Havice's efforts are working. He attributes the success to the steadfast belief children have in Santa Claus.

"In a child's mind, there are three things that are important at this time of year," he said. "You have God or Jesus if you are religious, then you have Mom or Dad because they're your protectors, and then you have the guy in the red suit," he said.

When Christmastime rolls

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