



The truth about Santa

A Christmas story

BY ORIANA GREEN

It's obvious Art Wheeler was born to play the role of Santa Claus. At 61, he has the girth and authentic white beard and mustache to look the part 365 days a year.

And who better to don gay apparel than a member of our community? But he's quick to clarify, "Art is gay; Santa is gay-friendly."

Wheeler takes his job as the jolly one seriously. As someone who's worked with kids much of his life, he knows how special a personal visit with Santa can be.

"I gave it a lot of thought...how to help kids



Santa is happy and gay

feel good about themselves," he explains, noting he used to work as a teachers aide for children with Down syndrome. "And I know sign language, so I can help deaf kids who come to see Santa."

So how did he get this gig? Magically, of course! 'Twas the night after Thanksgiving just a year ago, when Wheeler detoured through downtown Portland to take in the spectacle of the city's newly lighted Christmas tree. And lo and behold, "There was a parking spot, so I walked around a bit, went into Pioneer Place and watched a Santa at work."

In need of a job, he instinctively felt he could "ho, ho, ho" with the best of them. "I knew I could do it because I spent 19 years as a free-lance clown."

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS



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