

PEOPLE

The truth about Santa

Continued from Page 1

Faster than Prancer can dash across the sky, Wheeler snagged an interview and two days later was suited up and handing out candy canes at Vancouver Mall. He received no training "because I was hired at the last minute. I just used my own instincts," he says modestly.

His instincts were as perfect as Rudolph's bright red nose. "You have to be very quick...sometimes parents are more of a problem than the kids," he whispers, explaining how he deals with punitive mothers and fathers who try to force their children to confess their bad deeds to Santa.

He simply replies with a spin worthy of a Clinton aide, "Oh, I bet you've been good—mostly." Besides, he adds, "I've got to believe in them if I expect them to believe in me."

Sounding more like Old Saint Nick by the minute, Wheeler confides his solutions for tricky situations. For greedy kids who can't see beyond the length of their wish list he asks, "What's something nice you've done

for someone this year?"

That, he explains with a twinkle in his voice, "helps them think outside themselves, to think of others. If you give gifts to people you love, you'll always have the spirit of Santa in you."

And what about little tykes who wonder if he's real? "I poke 'em and say, 'Are you real?' Then I ask them to pull on my beard, and that usually convinces them," he says with a hearty, good-natured chuckle.

Wheeler also prefers to rely on his own belly full of jelly, which puts him on the lighter side of the Santa scale, although he has an answer for that, too. "When adults say, 'Santa, you've lost weight,' I say, 'Yeah, Mrs. Claus has me on a diet—she takes good care of me.'"

Of course, there are heartbreaking moments, too. This year a young girl told him, "All I want is to be able to see my sister," Wheeler pauses, clearly saddened at the memory. "I said, 'Oh, wouldn't that be nice...I hope that happens.' She didn't want any toys—just to see her sister."

Most of the children, however, "are really tick-



And laying his finger aside of his nose, and giving a nod...

PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

Santa works at their school, so I showed up at their family night."

At the other end of the life cycle, he is also a senior companion, helping folks stay independent longer. "I take people shopping or do errands. One fellow is blind, so I read his mail and write checks for him."

As if that's not enough, Wheeler also works at a church one day a week. He's found his own spiritual home in the Anawim Community of gay men who meet for Christian meditation and prayer.

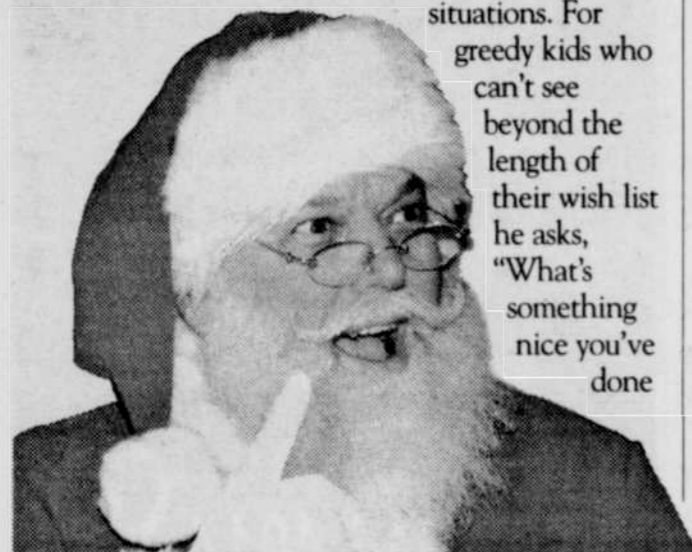
"I attend for the prayer and discussions we have there," he says of the group, which attracts about 15 people. "We've really become a community, and we do a lot of sharing."

This year Wheeler even bought his own Santa suit, and he plans to spread more season's greetings next year. "But not at the mall. I'm gonna do it on my own, do more gay events," he says, referring to his recent appearance at the holiday party held by the Portland chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, of which he is also a member.

So what does this special Santa wish for the gay community? "That we continue to keep making progress in becoming more accepted in society and acquire our basic rights. That's my wish."

If anyone can help make that come true, maybe it's the big-hearted guy in the snazzy red suit. **J**

You still can see ART WHEELER as Santa from 4 until 9 p.m. Dec. 21 and from 4 until 7:30 p.m. Dec. 24 at Vancouver Mall.



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