

Siuslaw News
P.O. Box 10
Florence, OR 97439

Opinion



EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

CATHERINE J. ROURKE
For the Siuslaw News

Santa Claus (Eloyd Ray)



Every day's a holiday for Florence resident Eloyd Ray. The Santa lookalike just can't help it. With people telling him for years that he resembled the man in the famous red suit, Ray finally decided to put one on. It turned out to be the perfect fit and a new career was born.

But Ray is no ordinary Santa. His jovial spirit, hearty laugh and long white beard are part of his natural persona, making it easy for him to step into Santa's boots all year long for movies and commercials, in addition to holiday events.

"I just love being Santa," he said. "It's the best job in the world to spread joy and laughter, hand out gifts and listen to the wishes and dreams of little kids."

Born in Pennsylvania and raised in Torrance, Calif., Ray chased some dreams of his own. Always in search of adventure, he joined the Air Force and worked as a policeman, machinist and trucker in Los Angeles.

In December 1999, Ray met his wife Linda on his birthday at an "End of the World" beach party and the couple married four years later, raising three kids from previous marriages.

"We've been committed to each other for 17 years," he said. "I'll follow her anywhere."

That meant relocating to Oregon in

2012 so Linda could live closer to longtime friends in Florence. Ray instantly appreciated the "courteous people, small-town feeling and lack of traffic."

"Where I come from, people run red lights," he said. "You don't know traffic until you've experienced the Interstate 405 freeway in Orange County. We call it the 'Orange Crush' because it can kill you."

"I don't miss it."

But it was four years prior to the Florence move that Ray discovered his Santa potential. With a minestrone of driving and delivery jobs under his wide belt — by road as a trucker and by rail as a Union Pacific train conductor — Ray realized it had paved the way for his true calling.

"I always worked an irregular schedule, on call and with short notice," he said. "I could never make any plans and constantly hauled a heavy packed sack, ready to take off in an instant. If I didn't arrive right on time, it could upset an entire system and a lot of people."

Sounds a lot like Santa.

With no refrigeration on the rails, Ray never ate a hot meal during his long shifts. Collisions were common as harried motorists jumped the cross guards, and conductors became frequent targets for shooters along the tracks. Carpal tunnel syndrome and shoulder replacements came with the job description



PHOTO BY CATHERINE ROURKE

Eloyd Ray personifies the spirit of Santa in and out of costume all year long. Above right, he is pictured with Sabrina Heard of Florence.

"After 14 years, I had enough," he said. "You do things driving a train that the body was never meant to do."

Ray was now ready to drive the sleigh. In 2008, a dinner theater asked him to perform as Santa. Then he heard about 300 Santas gathering for an event on the Queen Mary. Ray soon joined the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas and became a professional Kris Kringle.

As Santa, he takes his job seriously, one that mandates no smoking, swearing or drinking. Ray took it even further by attending a Santa Claus college and invested a small



COURTESY PHOTO

fortune in Santa regalia.

"Everything I wear and do is authentic," he said. "I worked hard for many years to become a genuine Santa."

Ray wears a \$2,000 hand-tooled belt and the "Armani" of Santa suits from Adele's of Hollywood. The boots alone run \$500; luckily, Ray already possesses the beard, the belly and the laugh.

His investment paid off. As a professional Santa, Ray appears in dozens of movies, TV shows and even famous commercials for Mercedes Benz. But Ray doesn't credit Santa college for the real secret to his success.

"I've never grown up; I'm just a large child who loves the magic of Santa," he said with a characteristic belly laugh. "It's my genuine spirit and personality. Kids live in a fantastic world of imagination and invite me there as Santa. I see the wonder on their faces and marvel at the mag-

ical exchange."

Ray bears a natural sparkle in his eyes that no Santa school can provide. Perhaps that explains why Costa Mesa Mall, the second largest in America, chose him over 200 other candidates to appear there each year for kids' annual visit with Santa.

What do they ask for?

"Multiple electronic gadgets," Ray said. "Some bring expensive catalogs, specifying gigabytes or requesting cash. Others simply ask for their parents to be reunited."

In his leisure time, Santa rides a red Harley and whittles toys in his woodshop in true Santa style. How will he spend his ninth Christmas as Santa and what's on his wish list?

Christmas Eve, his biggest day of the year, means a dozen nonstop appearances at public events, private parties and nonprofit children's organizations.

"I'll spend Christmas Day relaxing with my family after a whirlwind month," he said. "I have everything I could ever want. I love what I do, where I live, and my wonderful wife. 'If I could wish for anything, it's for peace on earth.'"

For now, Santa will settle for your cookies and hot cocoa tonight.

Catherine J. Rourke is an award-winning journalist, author and book editor who teaches creative writing at the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. Email CJReditor@gmail.com.

Special delivery: A cautionary Christmas tale



EDITOR'S NOTE: *What follows is a Christmas tale based on a true-life experience that I tell each year on Christmas Eve. It's a mixture of fact, whimsy, hope and my belief that a heartfelt wish is the cornerstone of life's most important magical moments...*

He looked very out of place sitting alone in the flight terminal, his arms folded over a Superman backpack, and large brown eyes peering out from beneath his baseball cap. A few seats away, a keyboard recital was being performed by a businessman wearing Bluetooth headphones and chastising someone at "headquarters" about overspending.

"I said gifts for the immediate staff only. That means Carl, Jody, Jessica and whatever-name — the gal we hired last month," he instructed, keyboard clattering continuously. "Yeah, her — Loni. But that's it. I never said anything about the sales department. What? Of course you're included with the immediate staff. Get yourself something."

The boy shifted, causing his

plastic chair to squeak a bit as he leaned toward the businessman. "Hey, Dad..."

For the first time, the man's fingers left the keyboard, just long enough to wave his son to silence.

The boy obeyed, and hugged his backpack a little closer to his chest.

"Hold on a second," Laptop-man said, cupping the microphone. "Hey, Alex, keep an eye on this for me. I'm going to the restroom." He then slid the computer onto the empty seat next to his son and made his way through the crowded terminal, still talking into the headpiece.

Alex watched his dad disappear, then brought his gaze to the laptop's glowing screen. It wasn't a look of intrigue, or even mischief. Reaching over, he pushed the device forward, teetering it on the edge of the seat. He sat staring at it, the debate of whether or not to push it to the floor evident on his face. After a minute, he thought better of it and slid the laptop back on the seat.

"You should've done it," I said, startling him.

I had been watching the events unfold for the last few minutes as I waited at Portland Airport for my friend to arrive from Dallas.

Slowly, an uncertain smile materialized on the boy's face, then quickly faded. "My dad would be pretty mad."

"Madder than you?"

He shrugged.

I looked up at the departure board. "You guys live in Chicago, huh?"

"My Dad does. We're gonna spend Christmas together."

Does he know that? I wondered, but nodded without comment, deciding instead to change the subject. "Did you see Santa this year?"

From the Editor's Desk

NED HICKSON

He shook his head. "I wrote him a letter."

"What did you ask him for?"

The boy withdrew into the chair, suddenly interested in the large, red zipper running along his backpack. He traced it with his finger, averting my gaze for a time before finally whispering, "Only Santa can know."

(Note: The next part of this story is pure speculation, based on a hastily spoken eyewitness account — and a handwritten note bound for the North Pole...)

Still talking into his Bluetooth, Alex's father emerged from the bathroom stall and squirted soapy gel onto his hands.

"Are Alex's presents there yet? Great. What did I get him?" he asked, rinsing himself, then pressing the hand

dryer to life. "That sounds good. What else?"

Suddenly, flurries billowed from the dryer, covering his hands with what appeared to be snow.

"What the...? Hold on a second," he said, shaking off the cold, white powder. He moved to the paper towel dispenser and cranked the handle.

Christmas wrap emerged and, along with it, a letter addressed simply:

To Santa Claus

Next to the postmark, the image of a mittened hand pointed to the words RETURN TO FATHER. He studied it curiously, then flipped it over and noticed his son's name above the return address.

"You get that from the towel dispenser?" asked a man who was standing at the next sink.

"Yes... yes I did."

"You going to open it?"

Uncertain, he rubbed his chin. "It says 'return to father,' and that's me, so I guess I should, huh?"

The other man stepped to the hand dryer, thought better of it, reached for the towel dispenser — then simply wiped his hands on his pants. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I

know I'd open it," he finally said.

With that, Alex's father peeled back the lip of the envelope and extracted a piece of notepaper. Unfolding it, he immediately recognized his son's printing, and felt himself skip a breath.

Dear Santa,

If you give me a new dad, I promise I'll never ask for anything ever again.

Love, Alex Riley.

His father stood staring at the note, oblivious of the man reading over his shoulder.

"Sure ain't no Hallmark Card," the man commented.

Wordlessly, Alex's father refolded the note and carefully slipped it back inside the envelope, then absently stuck it into his coat pocket. As he left the restroom, a muffled voice could be heard emanating from his headpiece — which was now in the trash.

Mr. Riley made his way back through the crowd to the terminal, his footsteps awkward. Uncertain.

As if retracing a once-familiar path that had become neglected and overgrown. Over the loudspeaker, boarding calls for Chicago had begun.

"My dad's coming back. I have to go," Alex said, and stood from his seat, backpack hanging off one shoulder.

As his dad approached, he studied Alex for a moment, then reached out his hand and nodded in the direction of the

terminal gate. They had only gotten a few steps when I noticed the laptop still sitting on the seat.

"Hey!" I yelled, waving it in the air.

Mr. Riley stopped and looked at me through the crowd, shrugged and then boarded the plane with Alex to Chicago.

More than a bit confused, I set the computer down and wondered to myself about what had just happened. That's when I saw the man sitting just a few seats away — and the identical look of curiosity on his face. Looking up, he noticed me staring.

"Listen, in a few minutes, I'm leaving for New York," he blurted. "I'll probably never see you again, so I can tell you this." He moved closer and, with his hands clasped tightly in front of him, spoke of what he'd seen in the restroom.

When he finished, the two of us sat wordlessly, neither of us certain of each other. That's when we noticed the laptop screen, which I'd left open, and these words scrolling continuously from top to bottom:

Merry Christmas, Alex...

(And a Merry Christmas to all of you. Thanks for reading and letting me share a little Christmas magic.)

Write Siuslaw News editor Ned Hickson at nhickson@thesiuslawnews.com or P.O. Box 10, Florence, Ore. 97439.

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Siuslaw News

and Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association. Periodicals postage paid at Florence, Ore. Postmaster, send address changes to: Siuslaw News, P.O. Box 10, Florence, OR 97439; phone 541-997-3441; fax 541-997-7979. All press releases may be sent to PressReleases@TheSiuslawNews.com.

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ads, Friday 5 p.m.
Saturday Issue—General news, Thursday noon; Budgets, two days prior to publication; Regular classified ads, Thursday 1 p.m.; Display ads, Thursday noon; Boxed and display classified ads, Wednesday 5 p.m. Soundings, Tuesday 5 p.m.

NEWSPAPER SUBSCRIPTION RATES:
In Lane County — 1-year subscription, \$71; 10-

weeks subscription, \$18; Out of Lane County — 1-year subscription, \$94; 10-weeks subscription, \$24; Out of State — 1-year subscription, \$120; Out of United States — 1-year subscription, \$200; E-Edition Online Only (Anywhere) — 1-year subscription, \$65.

Mail subscription includes E-Edition. Website and E-Edition: www.TheSiuslawNews.com

Published every Wednesday and Saturday at 148 Maple St. in Florence, Lane County, Oregon. A member of the National Newspaper Association