

Santa:

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Many more children had similar positive experiences with Saint Nick as they, too, met him and discussed their Christmas wish list. Santa continued to smile, but he soon grew tired. Helped to his feet, he was led gingerly to a seat in a nearby church to rest. At 6:40 p.m., he started his break. By the time he was able to return, however, the few people who remained had left. Santa was free to go.

On his way out, he spoke about his enjoyment of this celebration.

The children made him laugh, he said, and they caused him to remember his own childhood. One boy, Perkins said, asked for a train, and Santa was not sure if the youngster wanted a toy train or a life-sized one. Either way, he said, it made him think of his own boyhood and the train his parents gave him.

Perkins, who had met several dozen children up to the point of his break that night, said getting tired was not ordinary for him. In years past, when he had played Santa, he had more endurance, he added.

"I could go hours," he said.

Not this time. Assisted by another person, he walked carefully to his wife, who was waiting for him in their car. Still smiling, he wished children "Merry Christmas" as he walked away.

Perkins looks back

Perkins is undergoing chemotherapy for the cancer. Late last month in an interview, he discussed how he would like to be known by his community.

Born Sept. 25, 1951, in Pendleton, his grandfather, mom and stepfather raised him in Hermiston. He said he enjoyed small-town life. Agate collecting was a favorite pastime, and he called these rocks "sparkles of hope." He held to those sparkles during a childhood that was not always happy.

An absent father and an abusive brother, he said, were just part of his troubles. Also, his family suffered poverty. He explained, when he turned 14, his mother no longer qualified for government assistance. He dropped out of school so he could begin work.

He obtained his high school diploma years later, however, and walked in cap and gown with the Hermiston High School Class of 2010, he said.



Tito Munoz, 3, collects a candy cane from Santa Claus during a tree lighting ceremony Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, on Festival Street in downtown Hermiston. John Perkins, who plays the role of Santa Claus, has stage four pancreatic cancer.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald



Santa, also known as John Perkins, arrives to Festival Street in downtown Hermiston Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, for the city of Hermiston's Christmas tree lighting.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald



Santa Claus makes his way through the crowd Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, during the city of Hermiston's Christmas tree lighting event on Festival Street in downtown Hermiston.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Building communities

Perkins had, he said, "a starvation for life" that pushed him forward. He accepted agricultural work, then he was a truck driver and later a Navy electronics technician.

His service was difficult, he said, as exposure to Agent Orange in the Vietnam War eventually caused him to lose feeling in his legs. His service also left him with post-traumatic stress disorder, which continues to affect him. Still, he described himself as a happy, optimistic person who tries to share his positivity with others.

"I enjoy helping people. To me, if I can go out and make one person smile, my work is paid for," he said.

He credited his wife with encouraging his pleasant

outlook. From the beginning of their relationship, he said, she was a steadying influence. Together, they had two children who gave them three grandchildren.

A member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he described himself as a religious man who believes in community. He served as mayor of Stanfield for a term, winning an election in 1980. He also has worked as a volunteer fireman and has been an active part of groups. He has, he said, helped organize a veteran's group of motorcycle riders.

Becoming Santa

Perkins, 13 years ago, picked up the mantle of Santa to honor his father-in-law, Roy Otis, a man who had been Santa but died. His

wife, Jeanne Perkins, made him the costume he still wears. It is a suit made with love, he said.

Other trademarks of the role were his prior to becoming Santa. The white hairs, he said, started coming in while he was a high school student, and the beard was fully flushed out before he ever put on the Santa outfit.

Playing Santa through the years, he has toured the region, appearing in and around Hermiston, even going to Walla Walla. This was his first appearance at the Hermiston tree lighting. Also, the role has crept into his daily life, he said, as children recognize him as Santa year-round.

He said people have a special reaction to Santa Claus. The character, Perkins said, draws people

together in a spirit of love. Santa makes them think of generosity, togetherness and the need for unity.



Children wave to Santa Claus and reach out as he passes through the crowd Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, at the city of Hermiston's Christmas tree lighting in downtown Hermiston. John Perkins, who plays the role of the Saint Nick, was diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer earlier this year.

The diagnosis

He first noticed something wrong in March, when he saw a bruise on his belly, he said. It grew, and so he saw a doctor.

After tests, he learned he had stage four pancreatic cancer, he said.

He admitted he did not respond well. He cried, and he initially felt weak for having done so. It was only later he recognized there was no reason to feel bad about shedding tears.

His first chemotherapy treatment was "not bad," he said, especially because the doctors warned him about what he could expect. He was told it could hurt, and he might experience chills.

"So far, I haven't felt any of them," he said last month.

His biggest worry was that his treatment would lower his resistance to germs, he said, and he would feel sick as a result of portraying Santa and seeing children. Still, he said his doctor approved of being Santa. Perkins said he told his doctor he wanted to "go out and have fun," and the doctor said it would be fine.

"I made a commitment to the city of Hermiston, and I will do everything I can," he said ahead of the tree lighting. "I would be happy if I can do this."

Perkins on Dec. 2 lived up to his commitment, as he brought Santa Claus to Hermiston. Looking forward, he had a few other things to say.

"I can't say I'm ready for everything that is going to happen, but I can say, through my faith in Jesus Christ, I believe in everything that's going to happen. And it's not because my time is ending. That's not what it's about, it's about me being able to give the rest of my life in memory, and do it like a man," Perkins said.



Beth Spencer, dressed as Mrs. Claus, and her husband Phil Spencer, dressed as Santa Claus, pose for photos with bikers Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021, during the Echo Toy Run at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Bikers:

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"We couldn't let it die," Silvani said, adding, "It's amazing to see how giving people are."

The mob of bikers parked and dismounted their bikes. They marched toward three large bins and tossed in toy trucks and stuffed unicorns. They laughed hearty laughs and chatted as the gifts piled up, nearly overflowing from the bins.

As a former employee of the hospital emergency department, Silvani recalled a young girl who was once miserably ill. Sil-

vani found the girl a toy that had been tucked away after the toy run. That toy instantly changed the girl's day, she said. That's why Silvani said she thinks the event is essential.

Several people remarked on how the event shows the inherent kindness among bikers, dispelling stereotypes. Spencell said he joined the toy run when Sells started it 18 years ago. He started being Santa in the year that Sells died. Since then, he's led the procession through town, alongside his wife, Beth.

"It's an honor," he said.

The group this year was so big it stretched nearly from Stanfield to Hermis-

ton, at least two bikers said. Sam Bursell, a retired truck driver, said the community was more accommodating this year than ever before, pulling to the side of the road and allowing the group to pass.

"There's a lot of love here," said Bursell, who sports a long white beard.

Bursell kept a stuffed dog, bear and a lion in tow on his way to the hospital. He said if he were a child in the hospital, that's what he would have wanted. Bursell said the event exemplifies how giving and caring Sells was.

"He started a legacy," Bursell said, "and it's still going on."



Jack Cooper deposits a gift in a donation bin Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021, during the Echo Toy Run at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston.

Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

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