

JOLLY HOLIDAY



Old Town's own Santa gives visitors holiday cheer, good wishes

By Gabriel Alexander
Independent Staff Writer

When Santa Claus is busy at the North Pole, he's got a pretty convincing stand-in — a utility worker for the city of Clovis.

Barry Walzberg has the real white beard, twinkling eyes and ho-ho laugh to prove it.

But it's mostly in the eyes.

"Santa doesn't have to have a certain length of beard," Walzberg said. "It is the eyes that transmit the person's heart. Santa is the embodiment of Christmas spirit and if you have that Christmas spirit everything else doesn't matter."

Walzberg has been Santa Claus for five years.

He hears Christmas wish lists in Old Town Clovis during free carriage rides



Dean Slagel/The Clovis Independent

Santa Claus is spending a lot of time in Old Town this season.

offered by the Business Organization of Old Town every December.

Sarah von Berg told him what she wanted for Christmas on a recent Sunday.

The 3-year-old in polka-dot tights and a frilly pink skirt wants a guitar.

She was lifted into the carriage by her mother and stared at Santa with a big smile.

"OK, that's enough," her mother, Nicole von Berg, said when she refused to budge.

"She's very shy normally, but with Please see **SANTA**, Page A9

Santa: Visitors tell him holiday wishes

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Santa she walks right up," von Berg said.

"Santa's that magical person," said Carol von Berg, Sarah's grandma.

Sometimes children are unsure about Santa.

Babies stare and then burst into tears.

Young children approach Mrs. Claus instead.

Walzberg's wife, Lesa Walzberg, plays Mrs. Claus.

"I can't see doing this without her," Barry Walzberg said. "She makes all the difference. Some kids are a little nervous about me, but they're not as nervous about Mrs. Claus. She can kind of bridge that gap and let them know I'm OK."

Blame everything on Lesa Walzberg.

Her husband became Santa after she convinced him to play the jolly man at a Valley Teen Ranch Christmas event. At the time, she worked with a foster family agency at the Madera group home for troubled youths.

"They needed a Santa and I had a beard," Barry Walzberg said.

He was hooked after interacting with the foster children.

"The first kid that comes up shows you what Christmas is all about," he said. "You just can't stop."

In the car on the way home, he asked Lesa Walzberg to be Mrs. Claus next year.

Little did they know they

Meet Santa Claus from 12 to 4 p.m. Dec. 16-17 in Old Town Clovis. Free carriage rides and chats with Santa are offered by the Business Organization of Old Town. The carriage takes off from Story Teller Images, 320 Polasky Ave. For more information, contact BOOT, 298-5774.

would make appearances at Old Town Clovis, the city's annual Christmas tree lighting and private parties.

They would end up with their own Web site — www.CheckingTwice.com — and join organizations such as Santas Across the Globe and The National Beard Registry. His beard is No. 1349 — a 10-year-old, Santa-type beard that is normally brownish gray, but white during the Christmas season.

Santas Across the Globe is an online group of santas from Japan to Norway. They chat about the best way to bleach a beard and how to answer tough questions from doubting children.

The tips didn't prepare Barry



Dean Sigafo/The Clovis Independent

Santa offers a candy cane to Porter Boudt, 4. A horse-drawn carriage with Santa takes shoppers on rides through Old Town.

Walzberg for Charlotte, a 10-year-old girl who quizzed him recently.

"Why are you so fat?" she asked.

"How tall are the elves?"

"What's the name of the tallest elf and the shortest elf?"

"What's your father's name?"

"Where's your sleigh?"

Walzberg has heard every kind of question.

"Children will tell Santa things they won't tell other people," Lesa Walzberg said.

Once a child asked Barry

Walzberg to cure her grandma who was dying of leukemia. Another child asked him to bring back Daddy who died last year.

All he can do is show them love.

He tells them Santa doesn't have all powers; he only makes toys.

"For children, Santa is the way they can tangibly understand the spirit of giving and love that Christmas represents," Barry Walzberg said. "That's why I take this so seriously, so I can show that to them."

For adults, Santa brings back

memories from their childhood.

At a church function, a 70-year-old woman sat on his lap for a photo. At first she was proper and bashful.

"Move closer for a Santa Baby photo," Lesa Walzberg encouraged.

She wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his chest.

"She squeezed him so tight," Lesa Walzberg said. "She said, 'That's the first time I sat on Santa's lap.'"

There are many reasons the Walzbergs don red suits and

white fur during the Christmas season.

They do it for laughs when they hear children asking for M&M'S or an application to be an elf for Christmas.

They do it to bring a little Christmas spirit to 70-year-olds and 7-year-olds.

The main reason? "He represents unconditional love," Lesa Walzberg said. "He gives gifts without expecting anything in return."

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