

Here Comes Santa Claus: One Man Embodies the Christmas Spirit

Published in *Hyde Park Living* magazine

Parents, unless you want your children’s fanciful notions of Santa Claus to be debunked, don’t let them anywhere near this article!

Of course, you could just tell them that Mr. Kris Kringle also goes by the name of Gary Jones.

Every holiday season, Mr. Jones dons the famous costume we all know and love—right down to the square spectacles and black rubber boots—and is transformed into Santa Claus for a month of Sundays.

Gary lends his Santa services to private parties, schools, and churches, but his main appearance is at the annual children’s Christmas party at the Knights of Columbus. Kids of all ages line up to climb onto Gary’s lap and disclose their most coveted toys, games, and aspirations.

“I haven’t missed one season in 20 years,” 63-year-old Gary is proud to point out. “I love it.” Born in Kentucky, Gary moved to the Hyde Park area when he was 13. He now lives in Oakley with his wife of 33 years, Diane. “I love it here,” he says of Hyde Park. “It’s nice and quiet, and the people are so friendly.”

A retired concrete designer, Gary worked for the state of Ohio for 43 years. He has been an active member of the Knights of Columbus since he was 18 years old, and has formed lifelong friendships there.

The KOC is a male Catholic organization with a humanitarian objective. Nationally, they assist the needy, make generous contributions to charity, and provide benefits to families. Gary’s chapter is the eldest council in the city. Local activities include providing aid for mental retardation initiatives, supporting the youth

ministry at the parish, and offering assistance to students. Gary originally joined the Walnut Hills location, and the group has since moved to St. Gertrude's Parish in Madeira.

"Gary has provided extensive aid to local churches," says KOC member John Holder. "He's working all the time, helping as many people as he possibly can." In addition to acting as Kris Kringle, Gary volunteers for the Meals on Wheels program at the Deupree House in Hyde Park. Twice a week, he delivers food to the elderly or ill. "I really enjoy it," Gary says. "I've met a lot of wonderful people on my routes." He also brings bread to several homeless shelters downtown, and helps organize events for the Milford Youth Retreat program.

So how did Gary get nominated for his holiday duties? "I volunteered," he grins. "I thought it sounded like fun." A woman associated with the church made the costume for him. "I used to have to wear a pillow underneath it, but now I don't," Gary laughs, patting his stomach.

Not only is the belly authentic, but so is the beard. A few months before each holiday season, Gary grows a full white beard as the perfect complement to his ensemble. "I used to wear a fake one," he says. "But a few years ago, one of the kids reached up and pulled it off." Gary claims that sporting a real beard makes the whole experience more realistic, convincing even skeptical kids that he's the real thing.

The KOC Christmas party will take place on December 20 from 2-4 p.m. Gary makes his grand entrance as jolly St. Nick at 3:00. Before the main attraction, a magician performs for the kids, who range in age from infant to preteen. Gifts are handed out to all of the children. All KOC members' families and friends are welcome to attend. "It's a very family-oriented day," Gary notes.

Over the past two decades, Gary has received hundreds of beseeching requests from kids clutching dog-eared wish lists. Their pleas have ranged from run-of-the-mill toys to more far-fetched desires. “One child asked for a Porsche,” Gary laughs. There have also been heartfelt requests that had nothing to do with material items. “There was a boy who was 6 or 7. He had just lost his father, and he asked me if I would bring him a new dad. That pretty much broke my heart...it really put things into perspective.”

KOC meetings are held on the first and third Thursday of each month. During the first meeting, the committee discusses community activities and assistance programs, while the second meeting is a more social affair, during which the men play cards and talk. There are 20 active members and 200 registered members. “I’ve met some of my dearest friends through the KOC,” Gary says. His 32-year-old son, Don, is also a member.

Gary is more than happy to appear as Santa Claus for private events outside the KOC—and he refuses to take a penny for it. “I’d rather people donate to their favorite charity than pay me.” After meeting Gary, it’s safe to say that Santa’s persona rests in good hands. His unselfish, generous nature truly exemplifies the spirit of the season.

The Madeira Knights of Columbus is located at St. Gertrude’s Parish Center on Miami Avenue. For more information on the KOC and its annual children’s Christmas party, you can call 561-KOFC.