

Ho, ho—Whoa! Virus keeping most Santas at a distance

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Santa Claus waves at children and their families from behind a transparent barrier at Bass Pro Shops, Friday, Nov. 20, 2020, in Miami. This is Santa Claus in the Coronavirus Age, where visits are done with layers of protection or moved online. Putting hundreds of kids a day onto your lap to talk directly into your face—that's not happening. (AP Photo/Lynne Sladky)

Brad Six becomes Santa Claus, pulling his black boots over his red pants in the office of a Miami outdoor supply company. It's hot, so he forgoes the traditional heavy jacket for a lightweight vest and grabs his Santa hat.

But before sliding it on, the gray-bearded 61-year-old dons a plastic face shield and then takes his chair positioned behind a plexiglass sheet.

"Getting paid is nice, but to get your battery recharged and to really get something lasting out of it requires interacting with the kids—you don't get a lot of that this year," said Six, who first portrayed Santa 35 years ago.

This is Santa Claus in the Coronavirus Age, where visits are conducted with layers of protection or online. Putting hundreds of kids daily onto Santa's lap to talk into his face—that's not happening for most. The physical attributes that make the perfect Santa align perfectly with those that make COVID-19 especially deadly.

"Most of us tick all the boxes: We are old, we are overweight, we have diabetes and if we don't have diabetes, we have heart disease," said Stephen Arnold, the president of IBRBS, an association formerly known as the International Brotherhood of Real Bearded Santas.

That has spurred creativity in Santa's workshops. Santas conducting in-person visits are using some combination of masks, the outdoors, barriers and distance for safety. Others are doing virtual visits, where children chat with Santa online for prices typically ranging from \$20 to \$100, depending on the length and extras, such as whether customers want a recording. Some Santas are taking the season off.

"Santa safety is our No. 1 concern" and negotiated into every contract, said Mitch Allen, president of HireSanta, one of the nation's largest

agencies. He said the pandemic initially dried up his business, but it bounced back, especially online.

The average Santa makes \$5,000 to \$10,000 during a normal season, Allen said. That's a welcome bonus for men often retired on a fixed income, but many Santas say revenue is down as corporate parties and other lucrative gigs evaporated.

Jac Grimes, a Santa in Greensboro, North Carolina, gave up home visits, about a third of his business. He did it not just for his own health, but to prevent becoming a superspreader, fearing he'd pass the virus from one family to the next.

At a farmers market he annually works, Grimes and his wife dress up as Santa and Mrs. Claus and sit in a parking lot where they talk to people who remain inside their cars. Some homeowners associations are moving their annual Santa-visitation parties outdoors; Grimes will arrive in his red convertible to greet the crowds from afar.

One of the hardest adjustments Santas have made is wearing masks that hide their painstakingly grown beards.

"Santa performers are fairly vain people—if they are good," Grimes said.

The virus has many Santas and parents turning to virtual visits, which are booked through each Santa's personal website or agencies like Allen's. That often has Santas turning to their children and others for help mastering the computer skills needed.



Brad Six, wearing a protective face shield, looks in the mirror as he prepares to work as Santa Claus at Bass Pro Shops, Friday, Nov. 20, 2020, in Miami. This is Santa Claus in the Coronavirus Age, where visits are done with layers of protection or moved online. Putting hundreds of kids a day onto your lap to talk directly into your face—that's not happening. (AP Photo/Lynne Sladky)

"It has been a challenge," said Christopher Saunders, a Santa performer in Tool, Texas, a small town near Dallas.

But Saunders and others say virtual sessions are a good if imperfect substitute for in-person visits. Parents fill out questionnaires, allowing performers to personalize their patter, and a side benefit is that the sessions aren't rushed. Many Santa mall visits last no more than two minutes to keep the line moving.

"You get a different energy," Saunders said of the virtual visits. "You can see the child's expressions, as pure as they are."

Jim Beidel, a Santa performer near Seattle, said knowing the children's personal stories, such as their friends and school, helps Santas sell their Christmas magic.

"It really enhances the engagement, the suspension of disbelief, especially among the older children," he said.

But even Santas with the best gigs are hurting. Howard Graham usually portrays Santa in the grand foyer of New York's Radio City Music Hall during its Christmas show featuring the Rockettes. That's gone, so he's doing virtual visits and five days with a historic railroad in Pennsylvania. Still, he's taking a financial and emotional hit.

"I love what I do ... bringing them (children) a little bit of smiles and hope," said Graham, who has played Santa at Radio City for eight years. "I am going to do what I can not to change that."

That was also Six's goal as he settled recently into Santa's throne for a three-hour shift at Miami's Bass Pro Shops.

As families sat in front of the plexiglass for photos, Six tilted his head so his face shield didn't reflect the camera's flash. He cheerfully waved children around the plexiglass so they could tell him their wish list, keeping them 6 feet (1.8 meters) back. As he wished them a Merry Christmas, an elf swooped in with disinfectant, wiping the plexiglass and bench before the next group sat.

Six said the arrangement is "a little easier physically on Santa's back because he doesn't have to pick anybody up, but it's not as enjoyable because Santa doesn't get the interaction he normally gets."

But for families, sitting with Santa, even if behind a shield, is a bit of normalcy in abnormal times.

Paul and Sarah Morris and their children, 5-year-old Theo and Sophy, 4, were among the first to visit Six that night. An Air Force family visiting from Hawaii, the Morrises cajoled their children into hugging for their photo. "Stop wiggling," Theo said, scolding his sister before each sibling told Santa their Christmas wish. Sophy wanted candy; Theo, a remote control Ford Mustang.

"This is definitely different," Sarah Morris said of the setup, "but the kids are excited and that's what matters."

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