

SCHOOL TEACHES THE ‘SANTA SPIRIT’ — AND IT’S NOTHING TO HO-HO-HO ABOUT

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MIDLAND, Mich. — Scientists may not have figured out how to clone humans just yet, but it looks like they’ve got Santa Claus down cold.

How else could you explain the sight here in October: More than 70 jolly men with white beards and jiggling bellies sitting around singing “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.”

As if anyone needed more help identifying them, one wore candy-cane striped socks and another had a T-shirt that read “Naughty or nice inspector.” They called each other names like “Santa Bob” and “Santa Norm,” and came in vehicles with personalized license plates: HOHO1 from Colorado, MR SANTA from New York.

With just over two months left before Christmas, these wannabe Santas all gathered for a tune-up at the Charles W. Howard Santa Claus School. The nonprofit organization, founded in 1937, bills itself as the oldest such school in the world, and is led by its dean and resident Santa Tom Valent and his wife Holly. [Video at the Santa School](#)

“I dwell on one thing and that’s the Santa spirit,” said Mr. Valent, 58. “Each time a child sits on their lap, this child’s going to remember this visit for the rest of their lives. We as adults remember sitting on Santa’s lap. It’s very important.”

This year’s three-day school began with a prayer — “Guide us in our Santa work ... Let our Santa spirit in this room grow” — and then got down to the nitty gritty. Many of the students came prepared with notepads and pens. Those attending for the first time, who pay \$360 in tuition, received a binder with the history of Santa, facts about elves, even holiday sign language.

MULTIMEDIA

[Video](#) and [photo gallery](#)
from Santa school

“Children expect perfection. Parents expect miracles,” Mr. Valent told the assembled Kris Kringles. “They want their child, who may not believe anymore, to believe again.”

To help make that happen, the school leaves no angle unexplored. There were sessions on breathing techniques and dancing, and more questions about hair care than a high school cosmetology class. Students even got to meet the two reindeer Mr. Valent keeps in his backyard.

One of the trickiest parts of portraying Santa, of course, is handling all the questions: How old are you? (St. Nicholas was born more than 1,700 years ago.) Are the reindeer boys or girls? (Females, since only they have antlers at Christmas time.)

Anyone playing Father Christmas needs to think quick, as the pupils learned during a visit to a local television studio where they took turns being interviewed and facing tough practice questions. Jeryn Calhoun, the only black student in the group, fielded a query about why some toys say “Made in Japan” instead of the North Pole. Without stumbling, the social worker from Roseville, Mich., explained what is obvious to Santa: toys are assembled up north but the parts are made elsewhere.



‘Students’ check out a reindeer at the Charles W. Howard Santa Claus School. (THE BLADE/HERRAL LONG)

The key to success, Mr. Valent said, is imagining Santa's world in great detail, just as a kid would.

"You have to build a North Pole image in your head," he said.

Or you could follow his example and build your own Santa House, the Disneyesque workshop filled with toy trains and animatronic elves that serves as the school's home base. (Mr. Valent is president of Gerace Construction in Midland.)

Inside, the student Santas — and some Mrs. Clauses — filled the room with hearty ho-ho-hos and holiday songs. Most bore a natural resemblance to Old St. Nick, with real beards and everything. Few, though, could come as close in authenticity as Paul Kudla, who has a geographical advantage over the rest. He practically lives at the North Pole, traveling all the way from Nome, Alaska.

"I'm 100 percent Santa now," the bearded truck driver said. "It just happened. Everybody in my town knows me as Santa Paul."

Everyone here takes the role seriously and wants to do it better, but the school — to which some have returned multiple times — is also a chance to re-energize and mix with others who know the holiday spirit as only Santa does. For them, it's like a Red Bull of Christmas cheer.

The biggest shot of adrenaline for some students came on the first day during "Flight School." Sitting in a giant sleigh hitched to artificial reindeer, each had a chance to pull the reins and get a taste of Christmas magic.

"That's as close to being Santa as you can get," said Greg Paxson, a 49-year-old insurance appraiser from Xenia, Ohio. "I just felt like a little kid."

Ironically, that childlike awe was sort of a problem last year for Larry Bennett, 61, of Monroe. It was one reason why the retired Ford worker was back in class this year.

"I didn't learn [anything] last year because I was like a kid in a candy store," he said. "I was so mesmerized. I was so amazed. But I didn't listen."

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