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Santa: Kids shorten holiday lists

Bad economy filters down to gift requests at Tucson-area mall

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Mrs. Claus has a message for Tucson tykes: The reindeer are fine.

Apparently, there's an e-mail circulating that shows Rudolph's head perched on the wall of a prominent Alaska politician.

"It's not true," Mrs. Claus said. "Rudolph and the other reindeer are just fine. They enjoy the carrots and hay the children set out for them on Christmas Eve."

The Tucson Citizen caught up with Mrs. Claus and Santa on Sunday afternoon as they took a break from their holiday duties at Foothills Mall.

Joseph Rodriguez, 4, had just asked Santa if he could bring a gingerbread photo album and a new dirt bike to his house on Dec. 25 when the jolly pair left their large green chair to chat.

Santa said many Tucson children are adding a new request to the commercial-fueled "Ten Most Wanted Toys" list for Christmas 2008.

One of the most popular petitions is more ethereal than a Nintendo Wii Fit and a little harder for Santa to deliver: world peace.

Mrs. Claus said there are always a couple of requests for "peace on earth and goodwill to men," but the selfless appeal has inched its way to the top of more lists this year.

"Maybe it is from their parents," she said, "but we're hearing it from a lot more of them."

Santa said those requests, as with those for a cure for illness, are difficult because he has to explain there are certain things even North Pole magic can't create.

"But I always assure them that we are hoping for that, too," he said.

Santa said he's seeing evidence that the country's economic woes have reached children.

"Their lists are a lot shorter this year," he said. "Instead of asking for four or five things, they are asking for one or two."

Santa has visited Tucson malls for 12 years. Mrs. Claus began joining him about four years ago, but she said sometimes the jolly elf insists on fulfilling his Christmas duty alone.

"Being married so long, we sometimes get on each other's nerves," she explained with a twinkle in her eye. "That's when he needs to come alone."

Santa said his favorite part of visiting Tucson is interacting with children, something obvious from his frequent interruptions of the interview so he could greet children passing by.

"You sort of have celebrity status this time of year," he said, smiling broadly. But, he said, that celebrity doesn't mean every child is thrilled.

"The hardest thing is when a child is scared to death and the parents insist they come up anyway," he said, shaking his head in dismay. "It kind of puts me in a bad position."

When the pair isn't on the mall circuit or up at the North Pole supervising the elves, Santa and Mrs. Claus don't secret identities as Laree and Jerry Daughenbaugh, and try to work or travel incognito. They aren't always successful.

"A few years ago we were in China and a grandfather grabbed (Santa) by the arm," Mrs. Claus recalled. "He pushed him onto a wall ledge, chattering the whole time. We asked the tour guide what he was saying and the literal translation was 'Christmas man.' He wanted Santa to wait while he got his grandchildren and could take a picture."

People may think they know everything about the country's most famous holiday couple, but Mrs. Claus said there is one secret she and Santa have never revealed before speaking with the Citizen.

"He's a much better baker than I am," she confessed.

"It's true," Santa said, chuckling. "She needs to go to remedial baking school."

All the more reason for children to leave out treats for Santa.

Caption: Santa was happy to see Julianna Melina Soto, 4 months, at her first Christmas visit. Mrs. Claus is trying to gather gifts to give to Julianna's mother, Diana Garcia. The couple's secret identities are Jerry and Laree Daughenbaugh.

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