

Heartfelt Thanks to Every Santa Who Keeps *Christmas Magic Alive*



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I've always believed in Santa. When I turned 12 and friends tried to tell me that my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were Santa, I rebuffed their truth. Even now, at 65, I believe in the magic of Christmas.

Nick Casey calls himself a 'Santa ambassador.' I follow him on social media, and when I learned that he'd just returned from Santa Camp somewhere in New Hampshire, I knew I had to talk to him and find out why he plays Santa year-round, in many different ways, for little ones - and adults like me.

"Becoming Santa wasn't even on my radar until 2013 when a friend asked me to step in and help out during Albany's 'Lights in the Park' event." Nick explains how Mel Deigel, a friend and fellow Santa, told him one of the people he usually worked with had cancer and was undergoing treatment. They needed a replacement for his role in the festivities. "My mother had passed away the previous December, so I wasn't even looking forward to the holidays - she'd loved them so much, and I couldn't imagine spending them without her."

Regardless, when Mel asked for Nick's help, Nick immediately said yes, curious about what they needed him to do. "I never thought he'd want me to be Santa!" Nick remembers with a smile. "He let me borrow his backup suit and a spare beard and wig." Mel must have known how the night's role would affect his friend and all the families who came to enjoy some time with Jolly St. Nick because he's never looked back.

"I was nervous that night. Until I saw the first child." I wait for my friend to say more, enthralled with his story. "The look that little one gave me is so hard to put into words," he recalls. "What was it? Wonderment? Hope? Joy and excitement? I think they were all bunched into one." It's funny - I KNOW he's not Santa, but it FEELS like he's Santa. "After that, it was a whirlwind - I had a blast!" Nick's sigh is deep, and he shares how he cried when he got out of his Santa suit, thinking of his mom. "She would have been so happy to see me play Mr. Claus." He says.



*“Christmas isn't a season.
It's a feeling.” - Edna Ferber*



I meet Nick at Congress Park on a Saturday morning, and he comes in a summer outfit; Santa sneakers, Santa socks, a Christmas-themed shirt, red shorts, jingle bells, a bag of coins to hand out, and a HoHoHo for anyone passing by. "You know it's a few months away, right?" someone asks. "I'm on vacation," Santa replies, his eyes twinkling.

Everyone wants to take selfies or have me take their photo with the bearded man. A group of women out for a walk see him from a distance. "Santa!" one of them shouts, and they head our way.

After a while, Santa changes into his December outfit. We're busy taking photos with groups of people visiting Saratoga, a Sheriff, and his pooch, and at the fountain with Spit and Spat when a lone man walks over to us.

"Do you mind?" he asks, holding out his phone. I don't mind one bit. I grab the phone and take a few images for him to bring home. He talks to Santa for about five minutes before the man's wife walks over. "Oh my," she says and puts a hand to her heart. Instantly, there are tears in her eyes. "Would you, can I?" she starts to speak, but Santa waves her into a bear hug. "Our grandson is going to be so excited when he sees these pictures - when we tell him how we met you," the couple laughs.



Nick tells me about this being his second year of Santa Camp. It's a school for Santa, Mrs. Claus, and the elves. The New England Santa Society hosted the event at Barbara C. Harris Camp & Conference Center in Greenfield, New Hampshire. "Last year, I took their introductory course - 'Preparing the Sleigh,' and learned so much, even though I've been playing Santa for several years now," Nick explains how the camp promotes camaraderie and the sharing of knowledge throughout the weekend. "We also have reindeer games, trivia, and even a Santa Swap Meet, where we can trade gear and accessories." I imagine this makes people arrive as strangers and leave as friends, which Nick happily confirms. "So, it's not all learning," he grins at me. I guess not.

Nick shares that he's never been on the carousel here in Congress Park. I'm shocked! I tell him we must change that as we make our way to the ride. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see two young girls with their mom. One steps closer to her mother's side and grabs her hand. The other one? She yells, "Santa Claus! Mom, that's Santa Claus!" I watch her barreling towards us, arms out wide. She careens into Santa, wrapping herself around his legs, giggling the whole time.

My heart is full.



He bellows out his jolly laugh when she loosens her grip and looks up at him. "My, my," he winks down at her. "You've gotten much bigger since last I saw you!" Santa asks if she's been good, if she's made her Wishlist, does she help her momma around the house. She nods to all the questions.

"I'm waiting to ride the carousel," he tells her sister. "We are too!" they both shout back excitedly. The youngsters sit on horses next to Santa, and we ride round and round while their mother films it all on her phone.

"What's that on your wrist?" I ask St. Nick. He smiles and says, "I will tell you, young lady. This here is a magic watch." Santa pushes a button, and I see two red lights come on. "See that? When I touch those buttons, time slows down and stops." I've never heard this Santa story before! My eyes grow wide. "That's how I can make my way to every single child's house who believes in the magic of Christmas."

Hmmmmmmm.

"How else do you think I get to fit down everyone's chimney, wander around a house here and then another across the continent? And, how on earth would I be able to sit for a minute to catch my breath, gobble up cookies and slurp down my glass of milk?"

"By making it magical for them," He tells me as we say our goodbyes, "I make it magical for myself."

Oh, Santa! 🍪