

You're a *what?*

Santa Claus

For Phil Wenz, playing Santa Claus is not play at all. It's his job.

Phil has been dressing up as Santa Claus for nearly 50 years. "It started when I was 4 years old," he says. "I asked my mother to make a Santa suit for me. I've worn one every year since." As a teenager, Phil dressed up as Santa to visit patients at a local hospital. He continued to play Santa in parades and other events, eventually landing a full-time Santa job at a Christmas theme park in Dundee, Illinois.

Professional Santas like Phil entertain children and adults during the holiday season at all types of events. They work at shopping malls or stores; entertain crowds at parades and tree lightings; and make appearances at holiday parties, charity events, and people's homes.

Most Santas work during the Christmas holiday season, which usually lasts from late November through December 25. Santas at shopping malls or department stores often work 10-hour shifts and see more than 150 children each day, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers. Phil estimates that he sees between 350 and 400 kids each day at the theme park during the Christmas season.

In the off season, Phil still works at the theme park. He also does other Santa-related work. For example, Phil has used his Santa expertise to consult for movies and television. He's also participated in a Santa Claus documentary and writes books on the subject.

Phil's year-round work makes him different from most other professional Santas. Some Santas might do other Santa-related work throughout the year, such as playing Santa in print or television advertising or in acting

roles. But because the holiday season is so short, many Santas have other, unrelated jobs.

Professional Santas spend a lot of time getting ready for the part. The physical transformation into Santa can take up to 2 hours. First, Santas apply makeup to highlight their rosy cheeks. Next, they make sure to have clean teeth and fresh breath. Santas then groom or apply their whiskers. Naturally bearded Santas must trim and sometimes bleach their beards, whereas clean-shaven Santas apply fake beards with special glue. Phil has six fake beard sets that he rotates; each is handmade and cost up to \$1,500.

Finally, Santas put on the famous red suit—which can have up to 100 pounds of padding. The suit includes pants, suspenders, a coat, boots, and, of course, the Santa hat. "When you walk out of that dressing room," says Phil, "you have to *be* Santa."

And although they are known for their bowl-full-of-jelly physiques, it is important that Santas keep in shape. Their work can involve hours of sitting with few opportunities to move around or stretch. Long periods of inactivity can lead to health risks, meaning that physical fitness must be a priority. "Nutrition is important," stresses Phil. "You have to take care of yourself and be healthy."

There are no formal educational requirements for becoming a professional Santa. However, aspiring Santas often develop their skills by attending schools, conventions, or workshops. Santa schools typically last a few days, charge tuition, and include detailed instruction on topics such as beard maintenance, communication skills, and sleigh flying. Santa conventions take place all over the world and offer both beginner and

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experienced Santas the opportunity to mix and mingle.

Santa workshops occur throughout the year and offer classes and lectures on a variety of Christmas-related topics. Phil directs a free Santa workshop in appropriately named Santa Claus, Indiana. The workshop brings together several hundred first-time and veteran Santas from around the world to share their experiences and learn new skills. It features carol singing, guest speakers, and presentations. Phil presents a lecture on the history of Santa Claus and gives tips on how to deal with feisty children.

Part of the value in attending these events is the opportunity for newer Santas to pick up ideas from veteran ones. “Aspiring Santas can learn from the people who are good at this and have been doing this for a long time,” says Phil.

One thing aspiring professional Santas must learn is good communication skills. Another is being able to improvise and think quickly—“a little bit vaudeville, a little bit creativity,” as Phil puts it. Professional Santas also should be enthusiastic about the holiday season and aware of Christmas traditions from around the world.

In addition, the best professional Santas are jovial and love to be around people, especially children. Santas must be patient and understanding when dealing with crowds of all ages—including parents. “Remember, you are the world’s oldest senior citizen,” Phil says. “Everyone is a child to you.”

Expert knowledge of Santa is important, because curious children often ask questions about Santa and Mrs. Claus, the elves, the reindeer, and the North Pole. “Santa is 1,700 years old,” says Phil, who is an expert in Santa history. Other crucial knowledge for Santas includes familiarity with the latest toys that kids might be asking for.

Most professional Santas like the freedom that comes with being their own boss and setting their own hours. But working independently requires a lot of motivation and self-discipline. As self-employed workers, professional Santas are responsible for promoting

Photo courtesy of Phil Wenz.



Sharing his knowledge about Santa history and traditions is one of Phil Wenz's favorite work activities.

themselves and finding their own jobs. They also incur a lot of business expenses, such as getting professional photographs and buying personal liability insurance. However, making these investments can help Santas find work more easily.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not specifically track the employment and wages of professional Santas. Most find seasonal work in shopping malls, stores, or photography companies. Professional Santas are often hired through referrals, so meeting other Santas can be an important source of work. “Get involved with a Santa group or charity,” says Phil. “They are great networking opportunities.”

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the earnings of professional Santas vary considerably, depending on the type of employer and duration of the work. The most lucrative work reportedly comes from contracts with shopping malls and photography companies, from which a professional Santa can earn up to \$20,000 in one holiday season.

But after almost half a century of playing Santa, it is not about the money for Phil. He still finds it incredibly rewarding. “If you’ve had a good day,” he says, “you have made countless people happy and created a lot of memories.”

