

# Christmas' biggest secret: Even St. Nick goes to Santa school

Mark Nothaft, Special for The Republic | azcentral.com 10:17 p.m. MST December 2, 2015



Mark Brenneman, a retired school teacher, has been playing Santa for 43 years. Brenneman operates Santa Claus and Company, directing a group of about 15 Santas, four Mrs. Claus' and five to nine elves.



(Photo: Cheryl Evans/The Republic)

Santa Claus seems to be everywhere this time of year — [at the mall, the zoo, at company parties and elsewhere \(/story/news/local/phoenix/2015/12/02/where-find-santa-metro-phoenix/76665462/\)](#). There must be more than one.

Of course there is, “but remember I can be anywhere in the blink of an eye,” says Chandler Brenneman, who for 43 years has played the role of jolly St. Nick to the delight of children everywhere. He’s everything you would expect from a classic Santa Claus: A full, white beard, wire-rimmed glasses, a red and white suit, broad smile and warm aura.

“Santa Claus is in the heart,” says Brenneman, who also operates Santa Claus and Company, a Tempe-based provider of all things Santa Claus and elves. “You have to have a love for Christmas and peace and for everyone you meet, regardless of their background and ethnicity.”

“It’s all in the heart,” he says.

Brenneman directs a group of about 15 Santas, four Mrs. Clauses and five to nine elves, he says, who make 400-600 appearances between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“We don’t go to the mall. Our Santas do special events like the [tree-lighting ceremony at Anthem, ZooLights \(/story/entertainment/kids/holiday-events-arizona-kids/75538964/\)](#) and photography, guest appearances with The Dickens Carolers (of Scottsdale), special engagement breakfast with Santa,” he says. “We do a lot of the resorts and last year we made 65 in-home visits.”



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So what does it take to join this merry band? After an initial interview and background check, Brenneman holds a one-day training session where everything from etiquette to personal grooming and income reporting is covered.

"We deal with it as a round-table meeting, where experienced Santas mentor new ones, all to create that picture that everyone expects. But there's also the business of being Santa like when to call the customer for an in-home visit, scheduling issues, making sure you're visible, and practicing stories and songs like "Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer," "Jingle Bells," "White Christmas" and "Santa Claus is

Training ensures a memorable experience for families, says Jason Edberg of WorldWide Photography of Cypress, Texas. The company provides school portraits, but also provides more than 5,000 Kris Kringles, elves and photographers to hundreds of malls across the country, in Phoenix.

"All of the staff undergo training, in-person, online and follow-up training as the year progresses," Edberg says, and explains that to be Santa, the company looks for candidates that display "a genuine heart with authentic care for all the children of the world who love to share their wishes for Christmas."

Authenticity and keeping to the story of Santa Claus appears to be central.

"From personal experience, I can see when children visit the set when Santa is away from the mall checking on 'toy production,' they get excited. When Santa is here, and are disappointed when he has not yet arrived," Edberg says. "Conversely, I also get to see when a child is dragging their father to the set exclaiming 'Santa! It's Santa!' and Santa is available to listen to wishes, provide smiles and hugs throughout the holiday season."



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Rebecca Brunell of Arizona Mills mall in Tempe, echoes the enthusiasm.

"One of the great traditions of holiday shopping is the annual family visit to (Santa Claus)" and to have their photo taken, she says. "I always wait to greet children bringing him their holiday wishes."

Simon malls didn't disclose training methods, but stressed that Santa is part of a larger holiday experience, such as "Cookies & Cocoa" noon to 2 p.m. Dec. 5 and 6; "The Dickens Carolers" noon to 2 p.m. Dec. 12 and 13 in the food court; a Salvation Army Angel Tree, where you can buy a gift for disadvantaged youths; and other events throughout the season.

These experiences and time with Santa hinge on the passionate individual employees and careful preparation, says Brenneman, who says a gaggle of Santas again expect to make 60-plus in-home visits on Christmas Eve, at a clip of 15 to 20 minutes each. Parents fork out \$100 of time so their tots may make their holiday wish to Santa, sing a song and give St. Nick his cookies and milk, usually to-go.

Thank goodness, Brenneman says with a hearty laugh. That's a lot of cookies.



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