



Santa Claus—also known as Hank Brown—rings a bell as he greets visitors to his workshop at Santa on the Porch in The Dalles.

A Jolly Old Soul

Kids share their wish list and families strengthen their community with Santa

By Lori Russell

While children around the world mail their Christmas wish lists to Santa's workshop at the North Pole, those in the know take their requests directly to the jolly fat man during his five-night stopover in The Dalles each December.

Some kids spot Santa from 20 feet away and take off toward him on a dead run. Others need some convincing to come anywhere near the portly

guy with the beard.

Not to worry. Mrs. Claus and the elves have plenty of hot cocoa and cookies to make sure the visit ends on a sweet note.

For more than 10 years, head elf Linda Hoffman has organized "Santa on the Porch," a fundraiser for Neighborhood Watch programs in Wasco County. She, along with her late husband, Bob, created the family-friendly event to raise awareness of the crime-prevention program.

Neighborhood Watch encourages citizens to improve the quality of life and safety in their neighborhoods by watching out for one another, and identifying and reporting suspicious activity to local law enforcement.

Linda originally designed the Mr. and Mrs. Claus costumes for the couple, but altered the Santa suit when Neighborhood Watch member Hank Brown took over the role. She pulled out her needle and thread again the following year for alterations when Sharon Meracle accepted Mrs. Claus duties.

Originally held outdoors on the Hoffman's large front porch, the event venue changed to Santa's workshop when the couple moved to another home. Despite the location change, the name remains the same.

Santa says the best part of his trip to The Dalles is visiting with the children.

"Have you been a good boy?" he once asked a child.

"Well," admitted the youngster, "maybe just a little bit bad."

Santa receives many gift requests for the latest and greatest toys, electronic devices and, on one occasion, a fly swatter.

St. Nick admits he had to ask twice to make sure he had heard the child correctly.

"The parents said it was the only thing the child wanted that year," Hank says.

One of the elves overheard the conversation and to the amazement of the family, minutes later Santa pulled the desired item from his sack.

Between gift requests, Mr. Claus often responds to questions from curious youngsters.

Where does Santa's reindeer stay during his visits to The Dalles? At the farm of a friend who lives nearby.

Would Santa be willing to part with some of the magic beans that help his reindeer to fly? Unfortunately not, says Santa.

"If I gave out magic beans, the FAA would have too many kids flying around," Hank says.

Mrs. Claus recalls one boy who was more concerned with Santa's wardrobe than his Christmas present.

"He said, 'I don't mean to be rude, but why does Santa have those dumb boots?'" Linda says.

Mrs. Claus explained that her husband's good boots were home drying by the fire.

Last December, she says, the young man, age 15, returned for a visit.



Santa on the Porch

Families can visit Santa, Mrs. Claus and the elves at their workshop, 3421 West 13th St., The Dalles, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. December 9-10, 16-17 and 18.

Enjoy hot cocoa, cider and cookies. Visitors may purchase a photo with Santa for a \$2 donation to Neighborhood Watch.

More than 400 people participate in Neighborhood Watch programs in Wasco County.

"One person can't be out there all the time," says Santa event organizer Linda Hoffman. "The more people we get involved in Neighborhood Watch, the safer we are. We can make the whole county a Neighborhood Watch."

For information about how to start a group in your area, contact your local law enforcement office.

"He told me he will never forget asking that question," Linda says.

Santa on the Porch draws more than 100 visitors a night. After the last child of the evening recites his or her wish list, Santa, Mrs. Claus and the elves pack up the cider, hot cocoa and photo printer, and head indoors for some neighborly time of their own.

Equal parts potluck and warm up, they gather around steaming bowls of vegetables and broth known as "Santa Soup." Elf Linda received the recipe from a friend in Alaska and named it after the bearded guy because he kept asking for it night after night.

"It is very popular after sitting outside in the cold for a few hours," Linda says. ■

For more on Santa Claus, see page 12.