

The School of Yule

Forget the North Pole. Every fall in Midland, Mich., the Santa Clauses come to town.

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PERHAPS THE ONLY THING MORE DISCONCERTING than seeing Santa Claus in the off-season is seeing more than one Santa Claus in the off-season. And yet, one fall day in Midland, Mich., there they were: dozens of men who look just like Santa Claus, ambling up the block in their street clothes, their archetypal forms recognizable at 50 paces -- pillowy white beards, spectacles, ample bellies. They had come, nearly 70 of them, for the 70th session of the Charles W. Howard Santa Claus School, to spend three days preparing for the upcoming holiday season. They were here to learn what to wear as Santas and how to act. But mostly they were here to *become* Santa, at the oldest and most distinguished Santa Claus school in the world.

As they gathered, their general Santa-ness began to resolve into variations on a theme. There were Santas in bluejeans and Santas in red sweat pants. There were Santas in motorcycle boots, Santas in black patent leather Birkenstock clogs, and one Santa in a pair of perforated red Crocs. There were cleanshaven Santas, Santas with real beards so frothy and luxuriant that their faces seemed embedded in drifts of snow, and two or three Santas with their mustache ends waxed into pert curlicues. The effect, when the group had gathered, was a nimbus of wintry cheer on a golden morning on which the leaves had only just begun to fall.

The 70th class milled around the Santa House, as the two-room building is called, greeting old friends and complimenting each other's beards. As Tom Valent, the school's dean, called the class to order, he said a short prayer asking God to guide the group in the "joy and responsibility of being Santa Claus," and quoted school founder Charles Howard: "Being Santa is a privilege, not a job." The Santas murmured in agreement. One by one, they stood and introduced themselves. There were Santas of every persuasion, from the celebrated to the rank and file. Some were professionally accomplished. "I was the Santa at Bronner's" -- a Christmas megastore in Michigan -- one man said, and the room gave a little gasp of admiration.

"We're professional clowns," said a man who had come with his wife, "and we wanted to take it in another direction."

"I just love Christmas," said another woman, from Ohio, who had come to learn to be Mrs. Claus. "I've had my Christmas tree up since 1989."

Nearly half were returning students. A burly Santa with a thick brown beard said, "I'm an attorney, and I keep coming because this is one of the few places where people say, 'Why don't you grow your hair and beard longer?'"

An imposingly wide Santa from Iowa with a tattoo on his forearm said, "I keep coming back because this is the only place I feel small."

One, a man from Stone Mountain, Ga., said: "This is the most terrific experience of my life -- almost like the 20 years I spent in the Marine infantry. It's truly a band of brothers."

After the introductions, Valent gave an overview of Santa, the historical figure, and spoke briefly about the role of Santa, in practice. In the United States, he said, "Santa is a jolly character, not a disciplinarian." Also, he said, a good Santa knows his story. "The children are going to have questions, and you need answers. You need to know the reindeers' names, what's going on at the North Pole, all that stuff." He showed slides from a trip he and his wife had taken to Greenland as part of an international Santa get-together sponsored by the Danish government. "That's what the North Pole looks like, kids," he said. "Real icebergs."

Valent, who is an engineer by trade, is also an accomplished craftsman, and he had constructed the building in which they were sitting to look like Santa's workshop, if Santa's workshop were located inside a Bavarian cuckoo clock. It was all blond beams and peaked ceilings, heavily garlanded with artificial pine boughs and lights, and bedecked with ornaments the size of cantaloupes. As Valent addressed the group, he had to raise his voice to be heard above the clicking and whirring of the automated elves and toy trains and enormous candy-cane-striped gears with which he had filled the place. Every 15 minutes, a glockenspiel chimed, and on the hour, two doors would open under the eaves, and two life-size carvings of a boy and a girl, which Valent had modeled after two of his children, would emerge and strike the hour on a giant bell.

At the end of the morning, Valent led a round of singing, something he would do between sessions and when it looked as if the group was in danger of nodding off or had already nodded off. The Santas heaved themselves to their feet, stiff from their positions on the school's wooden benches, and launched into "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" in about six keys.

"Okay," said Valent afterward, looking pained. "That was a little slow." Before the Santas dispersed for lunch, Valent's wife, a sweet-faced woman with curly blond hair who happens to be named Holly, passed around wide, red suspenders to all the new students. "I hope they fit everyone," she said, smiling radiantly. "They didn't have extra-extra-large."

CHARLES W. HOWARD, A FARMER IN ALBION, N.Y., founded his school for Santas in 1937 in an old barn on his property. Howard, who was the Santa in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in New York in the 1950s, opened the school after a visit to a Lord & Taylor department store in Buffalo, where he had been appalled at the poor grooming and comportment of the Santas working there. The school was tiny and no-frills -- a few wooden chairs in front of a huge stone fireplace. But Howard was passionate about his subject, and he drilled his Santas on the history and character of Santa Claus, as well as on a slate of related minutiae: appropriate toys for each age group, the mating and feeding habits of reindeer, the proper way to tuck one's pants legs into one's boots. In the booklet he printed up for his classes, which Valent still distributes today, there was a one-page essay titled "Regarding Santa Wearing Glasses."

Howard understood the commercial importance of a good Santa, and he framed the work of Santa Claus and its impact on children, whom he called "the customers of tomorrow," in terms of the value to the store. But he cared the most about the kind of man Santa was. In his advice to shopkeepers on choosing a Santa, he was specific with his recommendations. "A man of the very highest caliber you can obtain," he wrote. "Middle age, family man if possible. Fairly well-educated. Knows children, their habits

and traits.” His Santa was essential to the success of a store but morally superior to it; he warned against compromising Santa’s image by allowing him to make sales pitches or engage in other commercial activities.

The school grew over the years, and Howard added a Bachelor of Santa Claus degree for those willing to complete a semester of department store work, papers about the history of Santa and a thesis about Santa’s character. When Howard died, in 1966, his friends Nate and Mary Ida Doan took over the school, commuting from their home in Bay City, Mich., for a few years and then moving the school there in 1970.

Valent found out about the school when he was 26, and, as he says, “got the call” to become Santa. Valent is in his 50s, boyish, with a Midwestern tendency toward plain talk and modesty. His take on Santa is pragmatic but sincere. “I loved Santa as a little kid,” he said. “Our neighbor, a German farmer, used to come play Santa for us around Christmastime. We used to get so excited. We knew that Santa had the same German accent that our neighbor had and drove the same blue Jeep, but we were still excited. When Holly was pregnant with our first baby, I just wanted to become Santa all of a sudden,” he said. “You change when you become a dad.” He started attending the Doans’ annual classes, and when, in 1986, Nate Doan was ready to find a successor, Valent brought the school to Midland.

In addition to running the school, he and Holly hold an open house each year, as Mr. and Mrs. Claus, during the holiday season. (Valent is also the president of his company, Gerace Construction, which does \$30 million in business each year building dams and bridges.) He adheres to Howard’s original lessons and has adjusted the curriculum only slightly, as with the addition of a session on liability insurance and lawsuits, to reflect the concerns of a modern-day Santa. Under his leadership, the school has increased its enrollment, but it is not a brand; the Valent’s don’t sell Santa supplies or hand out mugs or T-shirts, and they don’t advertise. Tuition is \$300, most of which covers expenses. If Holly, who is in charge of admissions, believes that a prospective Santa can’t afford it, she lets him attend free.

TO BE A GOOD SANTA, YOU HAVE TO LOOK GOOD, and after lunch, the Santas gathered in a conference room at the Marriott, a couple of blocks down the street, for a session on makeup and costume. Synthetic beards and polyester costumes might suffice for amateurs, but part of the deal, for any reasonably serious Santa, seems to be a level of attention to personal appearance that probably had once seemed unconscionably girly. The primary attraction at the session was the hair and beard table, where hairdresser Sue Hickerson was extolling, like a barker at a county fair, the virtues of a silk protein serum for beards. Natural-beard Santas, more “real” and therefore more authentically Santa, are currently in vogue. “I was here 18 years ago,” one Santa said, “and I was the only one with a beard. Now look at them.”

“Guys,” Hickerson was saying, holding up a little bottle. “It’s really inexpensive. It adds the shine, the luster; it deodorizes. Say you have to go through a bowling alley; you’re going to reek.” She dabbed some on the chest-length beard of the Santa standing closest to the table. He pulled on his beard, gingerly.

“The best thing is just to scrunch it up,” said another Santa, who was wearing a red Kangol cap. He seized the man’s beard in both hands and began kneading it vigorously.

“I haven’t had this much attention since my first Communion,” said a man at the end of the table, as his wife fluffed his beard.

“What about curls?” another Santa asked. “I generally just pull it down and under, and fluff it, and use a light spray on it.”

“You can use a curling iron on it,” Hickerson said, “depending on how that scares you.”

“It scares me a lot,” the Santa said.

Santas not fortunate enough to be naturally snowy could bleach their hair, a practice with which nearly everyone seemed familiar. “I bleached out for about seven or eight years before my hair finally got the word and turned gray,” one Santa said. Beard-bleaching, however, is a source of anxiety for many; it is a potentially injurious procedure that many stylists refuse to do and which, one Santa noted, involves breathing through a straw to avoid inhaling the chemicals.

“Can you make me look like that?” asked a Santa whose hair and beard were black as coal, pointing to the white-haired guy next to him.

Ooh, you are dark,” Hickerson said, biting her lip. “If you over-lighten it, it will break.”

“One time I bleached my hair,” the Santa next to him said, “and it turned purple and then orange.”

Not all the Santas had beards; some had grown them but found them uncomfortable, and some, such as a Detroit police officer, were limited by their jobs. For them, Hickerson had an array of wigs and fake beards, made of yak hair, on elegant Styrofoam heads. The yak hairpieces, which can cost about \$600 for a good-quality one, were ash blond and fell in thick locks, like a judge’s wig. A beardless Santa sat in front of Hickerson and, looking alarmed, put his face into the beard she dangled in front of him. “Is there a way to get this to look more like a real bottom lip?” he asked, tugging on the chin, his voice muffled. Hickerson cinched the beard behind his ears and draped the wig over his head, where it lay awkwardly, its curls splayed like the tentacles of a squid.

Santas who had gotten the hang of hair could join the line on the other side of the room, where the Santa for the Chicago Blackhawks and an auto mechanic named John Wetters were doing makeup. “You bring the blush down from your nose onto the high part of your cheek,” said Wetters, a big guy with a brown beard and glasses, swirling a brush in a compact of rouge. “Personally, I use Mary Kay, because it’s one of the few I’m not allergic to.”

A tall, patrician Santa, who looked a little like Leonardo da Vinci, presented his face. “I have a lot of natural wrinkles,” he said.

“The wrinkles help,” Wetters reassured him. “They give you kind of a frosty look.”

The Blackhawks Santa was scrubbing a pair of dark eyebrows with a Mary Kay white greasepaint stick. “Don’t trim your eyebrows, guys,” he said. “Leave them nice and bushy.”

The next Santa, who, at 74, was one of the oldest at the school, had eyebrows as thick as a man’s thumb and tipped in a spray of white spikes, like a pair of spiny sea urchins. “Well, I don’t think we need to do much with those,” Wetters said.

“Good, clean living will do that for you,” the Santa said.

Over in the costume section, Santas with finished hair and makeup were stepping into sample jackets and pants. Santas who were not adequately plump could avail themselves of a padded belly, designed to hang around the neck like an apron, but hardly anyone needed it. Those who did were the objects of some ridicule. Like a Victorian chambermaid lacing a corset, the costumer made a show of cinching one Santa into the last hole in his patent leather belt. “We got another skinny one!” the costumer called.

The newly transformed Santas lumbered around the room in their outfits and hairpieces like astronauts taking their first steps in space. On a chair set up in the front of the room, they posed for pictures bolt upright, flushed from excitement and rouge. Valent, who stays cleanshaven himself, had changed from an embroidered Bavarian wool vest into full Santa costume, and his own yak-hair wig and beard curled obediently and naturally around his face. He offered a few of his personal grooming tips, including a short speech on hygiene.

“Real important is breath, kids,” he concluded. “You’re sitting there with candy canes -- it’s a mental thing. Remember to stay fresh.”

WHEN THE COSTUME SESSION WAS OVER, the Santas trooped back down the street to the Santa House. Valent had arranged for a Q&A with local teenagers to do a little market research on what was, and what wasn’t, acceptable in a Santa. The teenagers sat in a row in the front of the room whispering to each other. They no longer believed in Santa Claus, of course, but they were young enough to remember how it had felt when they had, and they looked simultaneously impressed by the Santas and abashed by the memory of their younger, more gullible selves. They seemed to relish the opportunity to speak frankly about what they had, and hadn’t, appreciated about the relationship.

“What were the best and worst things about visiting Santa Claus?” one Santa asked.

“I loved the big beard,” one girl said, “and I hated the smelly breath.”

“After I told Santa what I wanted,” said another, “he would just go ‘Ho! Ho! Ho!’ I wasn’t sure what he meant by that.”

Another boy said: “Once a Santa was rubbing my back. I didn’t mind if he placed a hand on my shoulder, but I didn’t like it when he was rubbing my back.” The Santas nodded. A couple of them jotted down notes.

“What are some of the things that you, as Santas, like to do for kids around Christmastime?” one of the girls asked.

“I like to crash Christmas parties,” one Santa said. “If I’m driving around in costume, and I see a bunch of parked cars, I’ll just get out and go in.”

Said another: “I like taking a child who’s right on the edge, who doesn’t know if he believes in Santa or not. And when he walks away, he believes.”

DINNER THAT NIGHT WAS AT TOM AND HOLLY’S PLACE, a handsome, rambling old house with a big stone fireplace. It looked like a house the real Santa might live in. It had a Christmas theme, but one that was tasteful and understated, with a notable absence of schmaltz -- no Santa in an inflatable snow globe on the front lawn, or plastic reindeer launching off the roof. (There were, in fact, reindeer, but they were real. The Valentines have two, Comet and Cupid, which live in a barn out back.) The Santas filled the halls and the kitchen and lined the long tables, cheek to jowl, in the capacious back room.

There were more returning Santas this year, Holly said, than in any previous year. Though the curriculum remains largely the same from year to year, the Santas say that they come for the camaraderie and to exchange, as practitioners of a fairly recondite art, the tricks of their trade. They stay in the Fairview Inn, a locally run motel just outside downtown Midland, which shuttles them to and from the school's activities in its red double-decker bus. The lounge furniture in the Fairview's lobby was occupied, at any given hour, with a handful of Santas talking shop.

"The guys get to swapping tales," a Santa from Franklin, Tenn., said. He had learned, for example, where to find cheaper liability insurance, "in case a kid slips off your lap or catches up on your belt buckle." Some have formed smaller groups of their own, such as the Bubba Santas, Southerners who meet annually when the Christmas season is over.

After dinner, the Santas lingered, availing themselves of the pies and cakes that loaded the sideboards, and talking late into the evening. At the table, Paul Morehead, a retired naval officer from Chantilly, and his wife, Nancy, were discussing vanity license plates with Lowell Hendrickson, a Los Angeles area Santa with a vaudevillian's curled mustache. "In the last two years, we just went for it," Morehead was saying. "I used to go make home visits and then drive off in my beat-up pickup. Now I have a little red convertible, a PT Cruiser."

"With dual tailpipes," said Nancy, a diminutive, vivacious woman.

"And lights all around the back," Morehead said. "And a license plate that says KRINGLE. I couldn't believe I got that!"

"I know," Hendrickson said. On one hand, he was wearing a Super-Bowl-size ring with a red stone and the word "Noel" around the side. "I tried so many -- REINDEER, DASHER, BLITZEN. Finally, I typed in IM CLAUS, and I got it!"

In the kitchen, one Santa, his sleeves rolled up, was doing the dishes. At the other end of the house, about 20 Santas were gathered around an upright piano singing Christmas carols. A large print of Santa hung over the fireplace as though it were a family portrait. It was a vintage depiction of the man, before Coca-Cola and the rest of the marketing world got to him; thin and drawn, he was wrapped in a long robe trimmed in fur and was making his way, alone, across a snowy field at night. He looked tired and worried.

SANTA CLAUS, AS WE KNOW HIM TODAY, is the serendipitous product of politics, commercialism and a small amount of religion. He started life as a real man, Saint Nicholas, a 4th-century bishop in what is now Turkey, and became famous for his wide-ranging generosity. So powerful was the appeal of a man who devoted his life to giving, that over the centuries, Nicholas was adopted as the patron saint not only of children but also of sundry others, including brewers, sailors, pawnbrokers and the country of Russia. Saint Nicholas's appeal waned during Protestant reforms across Europe in the 16th century. In many countries, he was replaced by secular figures or by the Christ Child himself. Only the Dutch kept their Saint Nicholas -- Sinterklaas, a severe white-bearded figure who was said to fly on a horse from house to house and deliver presents to good children, while his assistant, Black Peter, threatened to stuff bad children in a sack.

Saint Nicholas arrived in America with Dutch immigrants who came to New York City. After the Revolutionary War, a small group of intellectuals began playing up the

role of Sinterklaas in American holiday customs, as part of an effort to emphasize America's Dutch heritage over its British heritage. The group wrote an article or two about Sinterklaas, and the idea began to take on a life of its own; poems were published that fleshed out the appearance and habits of Saint Nicholas, most famously Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in 1823. Ad men, keen to the enormous commercial potential, began using him for their purposes, and he became known as Santa Claus.

In his early heyday in American print media, there was no consensus on what he actually looked like. The gaunt, robed figure of the Bishop of Myra in Lycea was long gone, replaced by a variety of depictions, including a Dutchman in yellow stockings and a tricorne hat, and a buffalo hunter. An artist named Thomas Nast, who drew Santa for Harper's Weekly during the Civil War, created the image that stuck. Rosy and bearded, he wore a fur suit and hat; his expression was kind, knowing and perpetually tickled.

Over the years, Santa Claus was appropriated for commercial purposes, selling products including cigarettes and time shares, as well as for charitable purposes, spreading goodwill in nursing homes and on military outposts, and raising money on street corners. For a Santa today, the opportunities are similarly split: volunteer work, such as visiting hospitals and appearing at fundraisers, and for-profit work. The traditional department store Santa, which first became widely popular in the United States a century ago, has given way to a host of commercial opportunities: store appearances, private parties, parades, photo shoots, television commercials.

While the Charles W. Howard Santa School is known among working Santas as the most venerable of the Santa schools, the name carries no special weight with most employers, who tend to rely on referrals and their own screening and training when making new hires. Still, one Santa said, it generally impresses people that he has bothered to attend a Santa school at all. Among the Santas at the school, the most vaunted of the commercial opportunities was working for the big photo companies that contract with malls. The work is full-time during the holiday season, high-profile and relatively lucrative; depending on the hours worked and level of experience, a mall Santa can earn \$20,000 in one six-week season. There was a sense, at the school, that mall work was slightly ignoble -- some of the mall Santas talked about it in front of the group in deprecatory tones, but in smaller conversations, they sounded as though they rather enjoyed it.

Jerry Julian has been working at the Apache Mall in Rochester, Minn., for the past five years. A youthful 54, he is slim for a Santa, and his look, jeans, boots and a red do-rag, borders on outlaw biker, which he parlays into kindly grandfather with a silky, well-groomed beard. Julian is a hydro plant technician in Colorado Springs, and he says he uses up all his vacation and buys a week from the company to work the 42-day gig, with one day off at Thanksgiving. His contract with the photo company arranges for complimentary meals, lodging and grooming at the mall's salon, City Looks. "I'm a high-maintenance Santa," he said. On his shirt, grass-skirt-wearing women on a beach serenade a Santa arriving in an outrigger canoe.

Julian has no children of his own. "Kids scared me," he said. "I was basically selfish." He says that he began playing Santa "out of pride and ego. I craved that type of attention, being on center stage," he said. At first, he said, he didn't really know what he was doing. "I went to agencies and training schools, who gave me just enough

information to be dangerous. I didn't have a storyline or anything . . . On my first day, they had me make my entrance out of the back of a mail truck -- 'Look, kids, special delivery!' I came out shouting, 'Ho! Ho! Ho!' and shaking my reindeer bells, and eight out of the 17 kids got up and ran to their parents."

The work, he quickly found out, can be grueling. Julian says he can see as many as 15,000 kids in a season. "After the second day, every day is 'Groundhog Day,' " he said. Trying to get a kid to have his picture taken, he said, "can be an eight-second rodeo. The kids are screaming; the parents are trying to make the kid offers. You don't want to have screaming kids up there; it pre-traumatizes the other kids."

But he found the work oddly energizing. "My first day," he said, "I had a little girl come sit on my lap, and as I was talking to her, I could see the power of belief in her eyes. I was so struck by it -- I thought, she has total trust and belief in me, and who am I? Just another clown without a parade. I looked around, and I realized I had 20 or 30 pairs of eyes on me, everyone watching me and totally trusting me. I thought, This is huge horsepower. You don't mess with this."

Most of the Santas at Santa school combine church and charity work and home visits, hiring themselves out to families for an hour or two to bring over a few gifts. Paul and Nancy Morehead were Mr. and Mrs. Claus for injured service members and their families last year at a Christmas brunch at the Mologne House at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Santas lucky enough to have a Mrs. Claus along know she can be a valuable wingman, entertaining the kids at the back of the line, sorting out minor disciplinary problems and passing out trinkets when the visit is over. "You don't want to be Santa alone," Valent says. "Santa's not a disciplinarian. Mrs. Claus can pull them up a little."

The Moreheads, who have been married for 36 years, will be doing the brunch at the Mologne House again this year. "It is some tough Santa work," said Paul Morehead, who was drafted into the Army at age 21. But he called it "a perfect event for me. Soldiers, kids and bikers." At the brunch last year, Morehead sat down with a young man who was alone on the stairs. "He looked about 14," Morehead said, "but he was probably 20. I don't know if he was a soldier, but I think he must have been. I guess a couple other people had tried to reach him. I talked to him for a while and drew him out a little. Finally, he asked me, 'Could you just give me a hug?'"

There are also Santas such as Eddie McDaniel, "the singing Santa," from Gulfport, Miss., for whom the role seems to be a natural extension of a career in entertainment. McDaniel, who has sun-faded blond hair and a wide, impenetrable brawn, has incorporated, seasonally, a Santa routine into his usual slate of nightclub and casino performances along the Gulf Coast. He has also worked for the area tourism commission, and he brought a postcard of himself as Santa, sitting by the water in a beach chair. McDaniel insisted that he was attending the school for purely pragmatic reasons. It would give him, he said, a "stamp of approval" in his work with elementary schools, where occasionally, upon his arrival, his employers have sniffed his breath to make sure he had not been drinking.

McDaniel, who spent Hurricane Katrina in an upstairs room of his house as it flooded, lives in a trailer from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. He says his trailer has come to serve as the center of a tightly knit community of storm survivors, including about 20 others left homeless and a couple of neighborhood dogs that were

swept into a tank of industrial dye and stained green. Last Christmas, he played Santa for people on the slabs where their houses used to be.

Valent himself has worked as Santa at the local mall and for the local parade, in addition to volunteering widely throughout the season. He tries to prepare his Santas for every kind of work, but he sees Santa work as a labor of love, not a job, and he moralizes, nicely, about the differences. “The bad thing about doing a parade,” Valent told the group at one point, “is it’s an ego trip. The glory of being Santa is sitting in a chair having a conversation.”

ON THE MORNING OF THE SECOND DAY, Valent had arranged for a couple of local elementary classes and a group of developmentally disabled kids to visit the Santa House, to give a few Santas a trial run. He had picked a couple of the first-year Santas and Mrs. Santas to get into full costume and appear. “You want to develop an entrance,” he coached his new Santas before the first group arrived. “Number one is: Don’t scare the children. Come in like a grandpa or an elderly man.” He slipped into his Santa voice, mild and amused. “Holy peppermint sticks!” he said. “I’m so happy to see all you kids. Who’s your favorite reindeer? For 30 years, they’ve been saying ‘Rudolph.’”

So that the kids wouldn’t get confused, Valent had the rest of the Santas sit at the far end of the room with their noses in newspapers. It was an unseasonably cold day for October, and a light snow had begun to collect on the leaves outside. Santa and Mrs. Claus waited behind the building while the kids filed in the front. These kids can be more sensitive to lights and sounds, Valent had reminded the Santas, and he had turned off the more distracting decorations. As the kids came in the door, they looked a little uneasy. But then Santa and Mrs. Claus made their entrance, and the kids’ mouths dropped open.

If Santa was nervous, he didn’t show it: He asked the kids if they like Rudolph, his voice deep and gentle, and he ho-ho-ho’d low in his throat (as Valent recommends, for a less startling delivery). When Santa took a seat at the front of the room, the kids made their way, one by one, up to his chair. Unlike the kindergarten kids, who were old hands at dealing with Santa, these kids were not entirely sold on the idea of sitting on a stranger’s lap. One girl sat down on his lap and stood up again a few times before finally perching warily on one of his knees. Peeking over their papers, the rest of the Santas watched.

Santa kept up a friendly patter, with his hands open in front of him, and when one girl stopped a few feet away, unwilling to get any closer, Santa held out his white-gloved hand. The girl grasped it for a few moments while she and Santa had a conversation too quiet to hear. When every child had had his turn, Valent, with his head down so as not to attract attention, started a chorus of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas,” which was the Clauses’ cue to exit. (“Always exit while they’re singing,” Valent said.) The Clauses backed out the door, waving.

THE SPIRIT OF SANTA MAY BE GENEROSITY, but the practical application of this is, naturally, toys. A working knowledge of contemporary toys is essential for any Santa, Valent explained. “When you talk to 5-year-olds for three or four hours,” he says, “your brain kind of goes to mush. But if you know something about what they’re asking for, you can break the ice; you can have a conversation.” In the afternoon, the Santas piled into two chartered buses and drove to the nearest Toys R Us, almost an hour away in

Saginaw, for a briefing on the year's most popular playthings. They were greeted at the door by Deb Cass, the manager, who was holding the most recent model of Tickle Me Elmo, the plush Sesame Street character that is a perennial object of desire for the 2-to-5-year-old set. Cass put Elmo on the floor in the middle of the Santa huddle, and he began to cackle and convulse. Tracey Bissonnette, the store director, came over to meet the group.

"We are the No. 1 store in the nation for Tickle Me Elmos," she said. Elmo flipped over on his back, and the Santas oohed.

"That is so cool," Eddie McDaniel said gleefully. "I've got to get me one of those."

"Oh, it goes crazy here in a minute," said Jeremy Pluta, one of the employees.

"How much does it cost?" one of the Santas wanted to know.

"Thirty-nine ninety-nine," Bissonnette said. "But we're sold out."

Pluta led the Santas briskly into the fluorescent cavern of the store. A Toys R Us store, in the months before Christmas, is like the industrialist dream of Santa's toy workshop: labyrinthine aisles dense with thousands of iterations of classic toys -- dolls, trains, builder sets -- each framed in the cellophane window of its box and glittering in the grayish light. Pluta stopped in front of a tower of large boxes. These were the Lego Mindstorms, mechanized robot kits for children 8 and older that retailed for \$249.99. The Santas gasped at the price.

"You can send it text messages telling it what you want it to do," Pluta said. The Santas clucked their tongues.

"Text messages," they groused to each other.

"I had Lincoln Logs," one said.

Pluta stepped over to a display of toy trains. "Boys love trains," he said happily. "My son is 2 1/2, and out of nowhere, he's going, 'Choo-choo! Choo-choo!' This is the GeoTrax train from Fisher-Price. Most kids are going to want it with the remote control."

The group drifted around the store for more than an hour. They saw, among other things, a radar gun, made by Hot Wheels, which measures the speed of toy cars in real time or to 1/64th scale; Baby Alive, "the world's first pooping doll"; spring-loaded Moon Shoes; a line of dolls in the image of lascivious, heavily made-up 14-year-old girls called Bratz Forever Diamondz; and many, many "Star Wars" products, including what Pluta called "the ultimate light saber," which can be taken apart and rearranged into any of the light sabers from any of the movies, and which requires, Pluta said, "a bunch of batteries."

Exhausted by the possibilities, the Santas trailed out of the store. "You know what, though," a Santa mused. "They'll be asking for this stuff. I don't know how they know about it," he said, darkly. "But they do."

DINNER THAT NIGHT WAS IN THE NEARBY TOWN OF FRANKENMUTH, "Michigan's Little Bavaria," at a restaurant called the Bavarian Inn, where teenagers in lederhosen served plates loaded with sauerbraten, a local specialty called Frankenmuth chicken and several varieties of wursts. Lamar May, a soft-spoken Santa from Georgia, his wife, Judy, and a few other Santas ate together. May had worked for Lockheed Martin for most of his career, and much of the discussion was devoted to Lockheed's C-5

Galaxy, which until 1982 was the biggest aircraft ever made, and the role it had played in wartime maneuvers, which led to a discussion of tactical decisions in the Vietnam War.

There were teachers and one or two social workers at Santa school, and at least five of the students, Holly said, were ministers. On balance, though, there were at least as many engineers and cops and career military men -- not, perhaps, the type you would expect to be concerned with costumes and beard-bleaching. But most of the men said being Santa is a kind of interpersonal *carte blanche*, a way for even the biggest and most imposing of them to become someone utterly magnetic. May, who said he can never resist clowning around with kids in restaurants, said, "I'm just some strange guy until I put on the suit."

Jim McDonald, who owns a convenience store and a bait-and-tackle shop in Hernando, Miss., and whose tidy beard frames his face like a riverboat captain's, said: "I got this white beard when I was 21. And it was a gift" -- His eyes filled with tears, and he stopped to compose himself. "Sure, there are benefits to the kids," he tried again, "but that's nothing compared to the benefits" -- This time he cleared his throat and stared into space for a long moment.

"It's a spiritual communication," said another Santa, who visits a hospital for 200 multi-handicapped kids. "Only by putting on the red suit do you get to do that."

"After a while," May said thoughtfully, "and I want to be careful how I word this -- after a while, you almost start to believe that you really can fix things, make things better for people. You start to believe that you really are Santa."

THE LAST DAY AT SANTA SCHOOL was spent tying up loose ends: parade behavior ("Number one rule of being on a sleigh: Sit down," Valent said), when to leave a home visit (before the presents are opened: "Because after they get the presents, you really don't mean that much anymore") and demeanor ("Be animated -- When you think you're being obnoxious, that's probably about right"). Valent told a cautionary tale about using black plastic garbage bags for gift sacks, in which he picked up the wrong bag in the garage on Christmas morning and delivered to his children a sack full of garbage and the remains of a Kentucky Fried Chicken dinner. He also talked matter-of-factly about what to do when kids ask for the impossible, such as having their dad come home for Christmas. "I tell them Mrs. Santa and I will pray for their dad," he said.

Midmorning, a bubbly young woman named Sabrina Frawley took the Santas through a brisk exercise session, and lectured them on healthy living. Good health is kind of a fraught topic for Santas; on one hand, they are expected to eat a lot of cookies (the school went through hundreds over the course of three days), and a certain bulkiness is appreciated as authentic. On the other hand, it's hard to be overweight and healthy, and several of the Santas said they struggle with diabetes. If anyone could inspire the Santas to reform, it would be Frawley, a brunette with a brilliant smile who Valent said had been a contender for Miss Michigan USA 2004.

"Put your hands over your head, and then bend down to the floor," she instructed during the warm-up.

"You're talking to Santa Claus," one Santa muttered. "There's not a floor." She dropped, catlike, into a forward lunge, and the Santas stared incredulously. "You want to make sure the knee doesn't go over the toe," she warned.

“No problem,” someone said. After a brief but earth-rattling set of jumping jacks, she got all the Santas on their backs on the floor, for sit-ups.

“Go ahead and try to get your head and shoulders off the ground,” she said brightly, bobbing up and down in the front of the room as though on a wire. The floor of Santas contracted with a grunt, without actually moving.

She concluded by leaving the Santas with diet tips. “They say, on average, you should drink half your body weight in ounces each day,” she suggested, at which the Santas shook with laughter.

IN ONE OF THE LONGEST AND MOST SOLEMN SESSIONS, a Santa named Roland Davenport, the attorney Santa, gave a lecture on the legal liabilities of being Santa. Davenport, an articulate and eminently pragmatic man, plowed through the distasteful issues of criminal sexual misconduct and liability insurance, and the pratfalls of flirting with grown women who sit on your lap. (“If someone is so taken with your suave and sophisticated manner,” he said, “they will find you.”) He included a crash course on contracts, saying, “If you see words like ‘indemnification,’ you need to look at that real close,” and he reinforced advice that Valent had given: to be careful where you touch kids, and to keep your hands visible at all times, for reasons of lawsuits as well as general appropriateness.

“When you’re in character, you have a responsibility,” he said. “You are Santa Claus, and Santa Claus has a certain character that we don’t violate.”

He also acknowledged the issue of parents, who can be the biggest problem and often try to use Santa Claus to leverage their children’s behavior, calling out, “No!” when Santa asks their child, “Have you been good this year?” The Santas shared stories of misconduct, including a man who told Santa to “go up under his daughter’s skirt and tickle her” to make her laugh. When the hour was up, Davenport turned to Valent. “Tom, get these people to sing for me,” he said wearily, and the Santas rose and belted out “Jingle Bells.”

“O’er the fields we go,” they sang. “Laughing all the way. Ho! Ho! Ho!”

GRADUATION CEREMONIES WERE HELD DURING A CATERED DINNER AT THE MARRIOTT at the end of the third day. It was a festive occasion, and the Santas were dressed up, some in their “toy workshop” outfits: vests, knee breeches, white tights and clogs. The Santa from Iowa was wearing a red felt bowler. When the Santas had made their way through dinner and seven or eight kinds of dessert, Valent, wearing an embroidered forest-green vest with a chain clasp, took the lectern.

There were nearly 70 Santas to graduate, and Valent called each one up. First-year students received a copy of the original Charles W. Howard Santa Claus School diploma, and returning students received, depending on their year, a commemorative coin and a bootjack. Valent treated each one with personal and unsentimental affection, saying, “They’re going to make a great Mr. and Mrs. Santa, and I’m so darn proud of them” and “Al’s from Grand Rapids; that’s a good Santa area.”

To the attorney Santa, he said, “Thanks aren’t enough, but that’s all you’re going to get.” Of the Santa with the red bowler, he said, “Only a big, tough guy would wear a hat like that.” The mood, among the big, tough guys, was teary. They posed for pictures with the Valent and returned to their seats looking pink above their beards.

About halfway through, Valent came to the name of a minister from Tennessee. “Lloyd comes from a wonderful family,” he said when Lloyd had gotten up to the lectern. He turned to Lloyd. “Is it okay if I mention your son?” he asked. Lloyd nodded. Valent cleared his throat and squared his shoulders, as though preparing to lift something. “Lloyd lost his son in Iraq,” he said. Both men were still smiling. The Santas drew in their breaths. Valent and Lloyd gazed out over the tables, focusing on something at the back of the room.

When everyone had been recognized, the Santas shifted in their seats. The moment seemed to demand some sort of ceremony. Finally, there were calls for Carman Lamb, one of the senior Santas and an accomplished tenor, to sing the Canadian national anthem, something he had apparently been moved to do in previous years. Everyone got to his feet, and Lamb launched into a spine-prickling rendition of “O Canada.” When he was finished, he led the room in “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and then the Santas joined hands and sang “Silent Night,” with some singing the verses in the original German. There was a long moment, when the song was over, before anybody moved.

NOT ALL OF THE MEN REMEMBERED GOING TO SEE SANTA when they were kids, but they all remembered believing in Santa. And they all remembered when they stopped believing. They also said, when asked about the kids who had begun to doubt them, that little boys are often the toughest customers: the most suspicious, the least demonstrative and the first to decide that Santa is a fake. “Boys never hug me,” one Santa noted. “Little girls hug me all the time, but boys, never.”

There was never a consensus, over the three days, on what the Santas should tell those kids, the ones who ask outright if they really are Santa. “I tell them I’m the spirit of Santa,” Valent had said on the first day, and a lot of the answers proposed over three days had sounded something like that, a way to avoid the truth and also avoid a lie.

Jerry Julian, the mall Santa, remembered a father who had come up to him one day in the store. “Santa,” he said, “I want to bring my kid in here and have him believe in Santa one more year.” When the guy returned, Julian got the kid on his lap.

“What do your friends tell you about Santa?” he asked the boy.

“They say you’re not real,” the boy said.

“Pinch my arm,” Julian said, and the boy did. “Does that feel real to you?” Julian asked.

The kid nodded.

“This,” Julian told him, “is as real as Santa gets.”