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Santa's long-time helper gets new gig at 91



By Brock Weir

They thought they knew what the deal was when they approached the jolly bearded guy in the red velvet suit.
Harry Vowles' grandchildren grew up ?pretty sure? their grandpa was one of Santa's helper, but there was always that lingering doubt in the backs of their minds. After they sat on his knee and gave him their Christmas wish lists, his daughter told him they were no longer so sure of their theory.
?She said on the way home to Barrie they weren't too sure whether it was Santa or Grandpa,? says Mr. Vowles with pride. ?When I put on the suit I was Santa Claus. I behaved as though I was Santa Claus and the suit changed me completely.?
Mr. Vowles was Yorkdale Mall's professional Santa for nearly 20 years, following his retirement from Famous Players in 1965 but this year, at the tender age of 91, he got a brand new gig, heading down Yonge Street this past Saturday night as the ?Head Elf? in the Santa Under the Stars Parade on Pace Credit Union's float.
Harry, a resident of Chartwell Aurora, formerly Resthaven, secured the gig thanks to a little help from Pace, the Town of Aurora, and a big push from Chartwell and their Moments that Matter Program.
?The program highlights wishes that come from our residents,? says Lori Hood of Chartwell Aurora, adding staff sit down, talk with residents, and fill out ballots for their seniors outlining wishes they might not trumpet to the world. ?Every month, we empty out the box and think, ?Okay, what can we do to make these things happen?' Harry's ultimate wish was to do the Santa Claus Parade in Downtown Toronto and be Santa, but we know that is a pretty difficult wish to make come true, so I wondered what we could do on a local scale.?
So, Ms. Hood reached out to the Towns of Aurora and Newmarket with a pitch ? just days to spare.
?I said, ?I understand that making him Santa at this point so late in the game is probably not going to happen, but can we at least get him on a float?' He is losing his sight, so while he still has some vision left, it would be nice for him to see what is going on there.?
Newmarket, she said, raised issues about liability, but Aurora ? and Special Events Coordinator Shelley Ware ? stepped up to the plate to find a float to accommodate Harry.
Enter Pace Credit Union.
?Pace and Carolyne Trussler came through for us when it sounded like nobody else was going to,? says Ms. Hood. ?What I discovered [talking to him a bit more about it] is he was Yorkdale's Santa in the 90s and I worked there in the 90s. There is a chance that we were both there at the same time. Christmas in general is his favourite time of year, anything he can do. We couldn't make him the big guy, unfortunately. Aurora is very strict about there being more than one Santa and he comes at the end of the parade. As they put it, the contract had already been sent to the North Pole. That was specifically what they had written in the email response to me, so I knew they were so into this thing too.?
Perhaps it goes without saying that Christmas is Harry's favourite time of year.

For many years, his time as one of Santa's helpers was a one-man show, until he met Eileen.
The marriage of ?Santa? caused a bit of a stir, landing them on the front page of the Sunday edition of The Toronto Star on December 12, 1993. From that point on, he and Eileen were a team, appearing as Santa and Mrs. Claus not only at Yorkdale but, later on, as regular fixtures in Gravenhurst's Santa Claus parade.
The tradition continued when they moved to Chartwell Aurora, entertaining their fellow residents in costume until Eileen's passing.
?I initially thought of being a clown for something different, but clown outfits are expensive and a lot of work to put on!? jokes Harry of the crossroads he faced upon retirement. ?As Santa, I could get dressed up and take it off in a matter of five minutes.?
But, although the gig was a lot of fun, it wasn't all jokes.
Harry becomes emotional describing some of the more memorable experiences he had as Santa's Helpers in one of the most prominent shopping malls in the GTA.
?I had a couple propose marriage,? he says with a sparkle. ?The fellow came up to me in the afternoon and told us what he wanted to do, asking if we would go along with it. Of course we would! He was sitting on one knee and she was sitting on the other. I said that according to my records he had been very good all year so I first asked him what he wanted for Christmas. He said, ?I would like this young lady to marry me.' There was silence. I said, ?Well, I'm not hearing anything here,' but while this was going on he was reaching into his pocket for the ring and then she knew it was for real.
?Another time I had a family with a grandma, a mama, and two kids. The kids came to see Santa, but grandma stood off to the side. They left and a minute or two later, the grandmother came back and said, ?I am 82 years old and I have never had my picture taken.' She sat down and we took her picture.
?Then, a little guy came up to me and I was sure he said he wanted a ?can of beer.' When I asked him two or three times, I finally figured out he wanted a ?panda bear.' It was a fun job and I enjoyed every minute of it.?