



A SANTA FOR ALL SEASONS

STORY BY AUDREY POFF
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

For Steve Southard, it's not the memories of Santa's visits from his childhood that impact his role as one of the most sought-after Santas in Northeast Arkansas. Most of those childhood memories have faded over the years, but the giving spirit and generosity of his parents remains and continues to inspire him today.

Southard, a longtime resident of Gosnell, moved to Jonesboro in 2013 but continued working as shipping manager for Nucor Yamato Steel in Mississippi County until he retired in 2018. His first experience in the role of Santa, however, took place in Blytheville years before his retirement.

SANTA WITH A CAUSE

Following the death of his youngest son, Josh, in 2010, Southard said he was distraught and decided to venture into the role by volunteering as Santa at a Boxes of Love charity event in Blytheville.

"I've been doing this about 13 years, so I guess I started in 2010," said Southard, also known as Santa Cause. "That was the year Josh passed away, and later that year I kind of got into it. I was pretty distressed through that. I had been toying with it a little bit, and when he passed away, Christmas was really difficult. It was always a big thing at our house, and this just gives me an opportunity in my mind to give back.

"I truly believe that God has given me the tools and the opportunity to do this because it can be pretty expensive, and I was fortunate enough to have a pretty good job where I could afford to do it – to go to classes and Santa schools and everything. So, I felt like it was a calling from God that really got me in pretty deep with this, and then meeting a lot of the key people that I've met ... everything just kept pointing me in that direction."

Southard says he doesn't recall a lot about Santa visits when he was younger but has no doubt that the generous nature of his parents played a role in who he is today. The son of Patsy Southard of Gosnell and the late James (Jim) Southard, he and his two younger sisters grew up in Gosnell, where his mom and sisters, Debbie Finch and Lisa Ballard, still reside today.

"That part, the memories of Santa, doesn't really impact me because I don't remember that a whole lot," said Southard. "What does impact me is my mom and dad's giving nature."

He recalled one Christmas Eve when someone called their house and told his dad that there was a family down the street that was not able to have a traditional Christmas with gifts and all the trimmings.

"By that time, the stores were all closed, so we gathered up the things that we had around the house and took them down there to their trailer," he said. "My dad and I went up to the door and the



Santa Steve visits with 7-year-old Talon Harris and his 5-month-old sister, Lila, at Santa's North Pole. In addition to the North Pole, he also visits local nursing homes, assisted living centers and hospitals each year, including the infants in St. Bernards' NICU unit, as a way to give back to the community.



guy came out and he wasn't going to take the stuff. He said, 'No we're not taking that.' We had quite a bit of stuff. My dad grabbed him by the arm and said, 'Yes, you are. This isn't for you – this is for those kids in there, so you are going to take this.'"

Just as Southard began thinking that their generosity could end in a fight, he said the man agreed to accept their gifts.

"That giving attitude of my mom and dad's, their big hearts that they've always had, is what I guess inspired my heart to do this," said Southard.

For the last five or six years, Southard says he has made approximately 85 Santa appearances a year ranging from hospital visits to corporate Christmas parties and in-home visits with families. He says his goal is for each child to have a positive experience when they come to visit.

"Depending on the age of the child and so forth, I want them to try to understand what Christmas is all about and not just about getting," said Southard. "I try to promote them giving, whether it's a just a hug and kiss for dad and mom or explaining that just doing something nice for them is what a present can really be. I hope they see Santa as a positive influence in their life."

In general, Southard says he refrains from using the word naughty with kids.

"I always talk to them about being nice," he said. "I try to never use the word naughty, I don't have a naughty list, I just have a nice list. I just try to be positive. I hope I can give them just a little smile that they can take with them. I love to give hugs, and I love for them to give me hugs back. I think it's good for both of us to be honest."

He also tries to make sure parents have a positive experience.

"I just like for them to have the same type of experience," said Southard. "I just want to be the glue at Christmastime for the family to love each other and care for each other. When I go into a home or something, I try to get everybody involved. I have been into homes where they just turn the kids loose on me ... I want the whole family involved, and I try my best to get them involved. Usually everybody participates and I get a lot of repeat business. It's been a real pleasure to do that. I take that as an honor to be called back every year because I become part of their Christmas and part of their family. To watch the kids grow up is just amazing to me."

AN ICONIC SANTA

Southard is a member of the International Brotherhood of Real Bearded Santas (IBRBS), the world's largest organization of professional Santas, and was previously awarded the Santa's Heart award by the organization. IBRBS provides access to professional level services including Christmas performer liability insurance, quality background checks, educational opportunities and more.

While Southard has added many components to his magical collection of holiday costumes over the years, this jolly old elf doesn't really need a Santa suit. At 6 feet, 2 inches and 260 pounds, the 67-year-old has his own snow-white beard, twinkling blue eyes and jolly demeanor that is recognizable all year long – with or without his classic red velvet attire and jingling boots.

Although the traditional Santa is among his favorites, his wardrobe has expanded over the years.

"The traditional Santa suit is just a signature of Santa so I like that, but I also like vests and shirts and stuff on my boots," he said. "I work a lot of times with just a vest and a colorful shirt that is



not as hot. It allows me to stay in the house a little bit longer. That has become really popular across the Santa Claus community. With my vests and my shirts and pants, there's no telling how many combinations I could put together – lots, lots.”

One of his most iconic pieces is a gold reindeer pin that he wears on his hat.

“I found another Santa Claus that makes those,” said Southard. “They’re pretty rare. He doesn’t make a lot of them. It’s Rudolph and it’s just something that I thought was a wonderful piece, and so it’s something I put on my hat and people can recognize me by that deer. It’s just a little unique. Not many people have those.”

Although he continues to attend Santa conventions and conferences, Southard says he has never tried to model himself after anyone else.

“I think that’s what makes me different,” he said. “I’ve never really modeled myself after any other Santas. I go to schools and attend classes, I take advice and suggestions, and I’ve stolen a story here and there, but I just don’t model myself after anybody else. I always tell new Santas that. I tell them not to try to be me because we’re not alike. I tell them, ‘You be you and you do what you think you should do.’”

Even more important than an elaborate wardrobe, he says, is having the right personality.

“A lot of these Santas, they don’t cut up with kids,” said Southard. “It takes a personality to go into a group of 200-300 people you’ve never seen before and go in there and be Santa Claus. It takes somebody with a little bit of confidence in what he’s doing and somebody with a personality that can do that.

“Some of these guys out there across the country think they can buy a really nice Santa suit, which will cost \$2,000 to \$3,000, and they think, ‘OK, I’m Santa now. I look really good.’ And it’s true, but if you don’t participate with the kids, if you don’t talk to them and entertain them a little bit, you’re not going to have a lot of work to do.”

For Southard, the role of Santa is not merely a seasonal job.

“By wearing the beard all year long, you’re Santa whether you want to be or not,” he said. “Even if you’re not a Santa, a lot of kids see you as a Santa if you look like him. I have some friends

that have pretty white beards and they get asked all the time if they are Santa. Kids to me are looking for someone who is loving and caring and most Santas that I know are that way. I try to carry coins in my pocket for kids who recognize me, but I have had to buy candy canes and stuff to get out of a store before. It’s a big treat to me for the kids to recognize me as Santa.”

A SEASON OF LAUGHTER AND TEARS

Over the years, Southard says he has had felt the gamut of emotions while visiting with families.

“I can tell you stories that will make you laugh. I can tell you stories that will make you cry,” he said. “It’s really emotional because you hear some sad things from kids that you really don’t want to hear, and then you hear funny things. It’s up and down. It takes somebody that can handle the emotional part of it. I think God gives me the ability to do that.”

He described a visit a few years back that took place at Santa’s North Pole when it was located on Highway 1.

“A family called and said they were coming from Batesville,” he said. “It was a Sunday evening and they said they were on their way and that their son had to see Santa that night. Their son was 5 years old, but he looked about 10. He thanked me and thanked me.”

Southard said when he asked the young boy what he wanted for Christmas, he was a little surprised by his response.

“He said, ‘I just want my mother and father to have a wonderful Christmas,’” he recalled. “He said, ‘I just love them, and I want them to have a wonderful Christmas.’ That melted my heart when he said that. I said, ‘Well, if you could have something, what would it be other than that?’ He said, ‘I’d like for my mom to have a nice piece of jewelry of something like that.’ He was still on his family the whole time, nothing for him. Finally, I said now look, ‘I need to see about bringing you something’ and he finally told me he would like to have a monster truck. If I had had a monster truck right then, he would have had it. He was so sweet.”

As the family started making their way out the door, Southard said the young boy came running back to him and reached out with a hand full of change.

“He said, ‘Santa, I want you to have this so you can get you a

nice Christmas gift,” said Southard. “I said, ‘You know what, I’ll tell you what you should do. You should keep that and that will be a gift from me to you so you can buy yourself a Christmas present.’ About that time, he dropped it and coins went everywhere so we picked the coins up and as he’s picking them up, he says, ‘Santa, I just love you.’ I said, ‘You know, I love you, too.’ So, he got the coins gathered up and the next thing I saw, he was running out the front door waving.”

Another favorite memory was unknowingly being a part of an engagement proposal.

“A couple came and let their kids visit and after the kids got down, the guy asked me if I minded if his girlfriend sat in my lap so they could take a picture,” said Southard. “She set there on my knee and the next thing I know he was on his knee proposing to her. He proposed to her right there when she was sitting in my lap, which was just awesome. It shocked both of us.”

Not all visits are as joy-filled, however.

“I had a little boy that came to visit. His grandmother had passed away and he asked me if I could bring his grandmother back,” said Southard. “I told him that his grandmother was in heaven and that she was looking down on him. I said, ‘She loves you so much and one day, you’re gonna see her again.’ He said, ‘Oh, thank you, Santa,’ and he took off running away.”

Southard says he carries a little prayer book in his pocket and if somebody wants him to pray for them, he will take it out and put them on the prayer list.

“I’ll take it out and write their name in it so the kids can see me,” he said.

While visiting a local nursing home a few years ago, Southard said he was getting ready to leave when a staff member asked him to wait.

“We had been taking a few pictures with residents and as I was getting ready to leave, an employee of the center said, ‘Wait, wait. We’ve got one more.’ She comes up pushing a man in a wheelchair who is wearing a black T-shirt with a screen-printed white tie on it. I visited with him and later they told me that for the next couple of days, all he talked about was seeing Santa Claus. I found out that he passed away a few days later. To be able to leave him with something

positive or something happy to think about, that means a lot.”

In addition to visiting with seniors at nursing homes, hospitals and assisted living facilities, Southard also visits newborns at St. Bernard’s Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) each year to bring joy to families who have babies who are struggling. With the assistance of Jonesboro photographer Melissa Donner, the two are able to capture the infants’ first visit with Santa during their stay.

“That’s not a sad thing to me,” said Southard. “I hate that any child is in the NICU, but I also know they are in good hands – they are in God’s hands right there. It’s a happy thing because I’ve seen the results of what those folks in the NICU unit can do. Those folks are God’s angels. There’s no doubt in my mind. They work miracles up there, so that makes me happy to see what they can do.”

SANTA’S SUPPORT CREW

When possible, Southard says his wife, Suzanne, will make appearances with him as Mrs. Claus. Following his heart surgery in May 2022, she accompanies him as often as possible.

“Since I had my health problems, Suzanne goes with me more,” he said. “If she’s not being Mrs. Claus, she’s in the background helping me. We work well together. She does a great job, but she doesn’t like pictures as much as I do. She loves teaching the children the real meaning of Christmas; that’s what we do together.”

In addition to his wife, Southard says his sisters have helped in various capacities when he makes visits to the Blytheville/Gosnell area and his mother has helped on occasion, as well.

“My mother has actually been Mrs. Claus with me a couple of times,” he said. “We would go to the nursing center in Gosnell and she knew a lot of them. We just had a blast. We cut up with all those people. It was so special to have her with me though.”

Santa’s North Pole, an indoor animated Christmas display, is a frequent stop on Southard’s schedule during the holidays. For more information on upcoming events and photo opportunities, visit santasnorthpolejonesboro.com. To schedule other appearances with Santa Cause, contact Suzanne Southard at (870) 740-0529 or follow Santa Steve on Facebook for updates.