



Santa Jim Steinmetz

SANTA'S GOT A CELL PHONE

When I was five, I was sure I saw him. He was walking down the stairs of my home, with a big white beard and a red coat. He hid his face from me, and told me to hurry back to bed. On Christmas morning, my parents, especially my big white-bearded father, told me it was a dream. "How could Santa have been upstairs?" he asked. "He goes up and down the chimney." End of story.

I held out for a long time. Longer than most. Then, when I was in my 20s, there was this white bearded boat captain in the Caribbean who took me diving for gold and almost convinced me he was the real deal.

"I'm Santa Claus," he said.

"I'm the Tooth Fairy," I said.

After I had children of my own, from October through the end of December, I told them I had Santa's cell phone number on speed dial. One false move and I was pushing number five. They always stopped whatever they were doing, just as my finger touched the button, and promised to behave. One time, I completed the call (someone was not sharing with his sister), and had a nice conversation about the benefits of coal.

And then this year, I heard the dreaded

question: "Mommy," my eight-year-old daughter asked, "do you really have Santa's cell phone number?"

I was so relieved to say that yes, I do.

Jim Steinmetz has always had a beard. After retiring in 2000, he began making toys with the Orange County Woodworkers Association, a group that makes and donates up to 5,000 toys a year to underprivileged children. One year, they asked the Huntington Beach resident to be Santa Claus at their annual Christmas party. Steinmetz said no, but his wife, Ann, made him rethink his decision. "You make all these toys for kids," he remembers her saying. "You can do it." Steinmetz, a father of three and grandfather of eight, had a short, mottled goatee at the time, so he sported a phony beard, as well as a wig, and the appearance went over well.

"I was hot and miserable," Steinmetz recalls. "I thought, if I'm going to do this again, I'll grow my own beard." Surprisingly, this time, his beard came in thick and white.

He did it again the following year, after which his wife offered to sew him his own red velvet Santa suit. She even agreed to be his Mrs. Claus. In 2003, after attending

a Santa Claus training seminar at USC, he became a member of the Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas (based primarily in Orange County) and began delivering beautiful handcrafted toys to needy children at the children's ward at The City of Hope and Orangewood Children's Home.

In 2004, Ann suggested her husband use his Santa talents for fundraising and Claus for a Cause was born. Mrs. Claus had another idea as well – why not join forces with their good friend and cancer survivor Faye Dietiker, who, after recovering from her own battle with Stage 4 breast cancer, founded Breast Cancer Angels, an all-volunteer, nonprofit group that provides financial and emotional assistance to breast cancer patients and survivors. Now, all the proceeds from Santa and Mrs. Claus's appearances, from private parties to the St. Regis Monarch Beach tree lighting and photos with Santa, are donated to the organization. "At the end of the season, we take our stack of checks and deliver them to Faye in a nice package," he says.

Besides visiting local children's hospitals and making an appearance at Boomers for the annual Christmas party for families of Breast Cancer Angels, the Steinmetzes have also visited Alzheimer's patients at a local senior citizen facility in the bluffs. "They may not remember who they are, or where they are," he said, "but they always remember Santa Claus."

Justine Amodeo, Editor-in-Chief

MAKE THE CALL

■ **HOLIDAY SPIRIT** :: Hire Santa for a private appearance at your home or a corporate event, and all proceeds will be donated to Breast Cancer Angels.

:: clausforacause.com

:: breastcancerangels.org

:: 714.514.9771 (Santa's cell phone number)

:: 714.842.8793 (Santa's toy shop number)