

Eshenbaugh says. "A lot of them come up and say they love Jesus. I like knowing they know the real meaning of Christmas."

The fun and festivity of the Christmas season is present all because of the birth of Jesus, and Eshenbaugh believes it is important to be sure the children do not forget this.

"The best part is seeing every child happy and I try to be sure they know what Christmas is about," he says. "I don't say anything (about Jesus) unless they bring up the subject. But if they do, I will relay to them what it is all about — the birth of Christ."

One particularly touching situation occurred when a crippled girl came up to him and he could sense her joy.

"She was about 10 or 11 years old and her parents got her picture taken with Santa each year," Eshenbaugh says. "They put her on my lap and it brought tears to my eyes because she couldn't hold her head up. Then they whistled and she smiled. She was so happy."

Being Santa Claus is a learning experience for Eshenbaugh and a lot goes in to his preparation for each day's work.

To prepare himself, he goes to the community room at the mall and meditates.

"I pray for about five minutes and then get dressed up and go out," he says.

In addition to mental preparation, Abshier had to explain to his six-and seven-year-old children (who still believe in Santa) what he was doing.

"We sat down and discussed it one night because we knew a problem would come up," he says. "We told them that Santa has a lot of elves since he can't be everywhere at once. We said we (Abshier and his wife) gather the information and send it to him."

When a child has been to another mall, he may wonder why Santa is in both places. For Abshier, the best answer is to tell the child that the Santas in the malls are elves.

"We have to figure out what to say so we don't contradict what their parents have said," he says. "As long as we are general with them, we don't conflict much."

Although Eshenbaugh's five children are older, he does have a three-year-old grandson, who does not know his grandfather plays Santa.

"When they first brought him up he was scared and ran away," he says. "There was no way he was coming up. But we'll try again later."

This reaction was not different from the reactions of many children. Almost everyone can remember being frightened of Santa Claus at some time or another, and Abshier is no exception. He says parents should not force their children up to Santa before they are ready.

"If they are scared, don't push them," Abshier says. "Let them witness others on Santa's lap and visit him several times before they actually sit in his lap."

"If they have time to walk around the mall, the child is usually calmed down within two or three visits."

Both the photographer and the helper who takes him up to Santa can help distract the child

As a child, Schwager's father was a captain in the Merchant Marines and was rarely home for Christmas. So when he got back home they would celebrate Christmas in February, March or whenever he came home.

"We couldn't wake up to Santa (on Christmas morning), but we celebrated when he came home," Schwager says. "We'd have a tree and Santa would come ring the door bell and we'd find presents on the porch."

Each year children must prepare a list of gifts. Eshenbaugh says most children see Santa as someone who brings them presents, so they like to visit him. Children really enjoy Santa Claus.

"When I walk out into the mall, I am always surrounded," he says.

Although most children ask for toys, Eshenbaugh had an

they look up to Superman or some hero," Abshier says. "They want to know how he gets down the chimney or if the beard is real. The best defense is to take the offense and ask them if their hair is real."

Schwager says the kids believe what Santa Claus says means more than what their parents say. Santa works with the parents to remind the children to behave all year.

"When I go to the houses and know specific things they have done all year, they believe Santa really does know everything," Schwager says. "Santa is a big power. The parents say, 'see, he does know.' They really do look up to you."

Schwager can't foresee the Christmas when he will not play Santa.

"I will keep doing it for as long as I can," he says. "I will probably do it for my own kids."

Abshier has enjoyed being Santa this year and will probably do it again.

"I enjoy the photography work more, though," he says. "I also enjoy taking them up to Santa. The helper who puts them on his lap can make or break the kid's attitude. If they are approached right from the beginning, any screaming child can be calmed down."

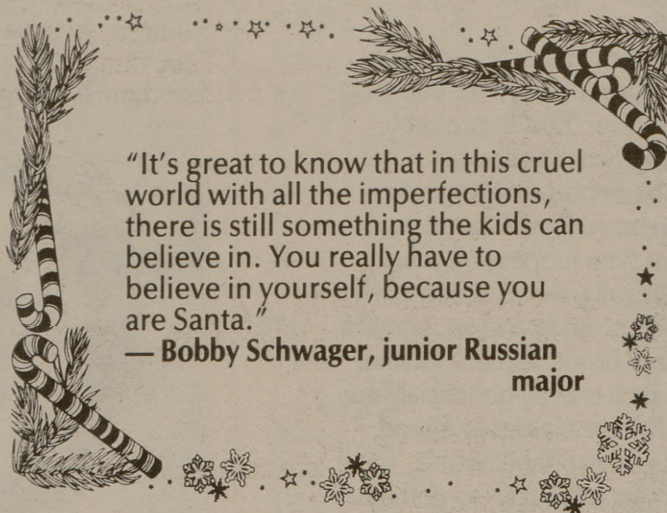
Because four Santas alternate at Post Oak Mall, Abshier and Schwager do not have to work as often as Eshenbaugh, who is at his job six hours on weekdays, 10 hours on Saturdays and three hours on Sundays. Beginning on Dec. 16, Eshenbaugh will be at the mall from 10 hours a day on Monday through Saturday and three hours on Sunday.

"This gets hectic, and sometimes you really need to get up and stretch the old legs," he says.

Schwager believes being Santa is not for everyone because the job requires a lot of patience.

"You can only get out of it what you put into it," Schwager says. "You are Santa and you have to live up to the expectations. I get a lot out of it; it is real enjoyable."

Being Santa involves a lot more than simply attaching a white beard and stuffing a red suit with pillows. A love for children and patience are necessary to live up to the expectations of the children. Those people who decide to play this role certainly believe the reactions of the happy children make the entire task worthwhile.



"It's great to know that in this cruel world with all the imperfections, there is still something the kids can believe in. You really have to believe in yourself, because you are Santa."

— Bobby Schwager, junior Russian major

so that a good photo can be taken of a scared child.

The only thing Abshier dislikes about the job is pushy parents with screaming children, because if the parents insist on pictures, they have an obligation to hold them.

"When parents shove the kids up to us, they cause problems for the Santa, the child and onlookers," Abshier says.

Schwager says children between the ages of 1½ and 3 are usually scared of Santa and his jolly "Ho, Ho, Ho." By watching the older kids their fears seem to go away.

Eshenbaugh remembers one particular Santa who made a lasting impression on him as a child and he tries to be like this man.

"I was a big boy and I always told Santa I was too heavy to sit on his lap," he says. "The thing that got me was when one Santa said 'you're not that big, so come sit on my lap.' I tell the kids now that I'm big enough and I can hold them all."

unique request earlier this week from one little girl.

"She said 'I love you, Santa Claus, and I love Jesus.' She wanted love for Jesus and love for her family for Christmas," he says. "I think that is fantastic."

Schwager had one little boy ask him for a paddle for Christmas.

"When I asked him why, he said, 'so I can paddle myself and my parents won't have to,'" Schwager says. "Another kid asked for \$2 so he could go to Pizza Hut."

Abshier believes almost all kids want toys, but they usually forget which ones they want by the time they visit Santa. When this happens, he tells them to write a letter to Santa.

"I tell them to write a letter so I won't mix their toys up with other kids' toys," Abshier says. "By doing this, they list exactly what they want and allow their parents to know what they want."

He thinks children look at Santa as superstar figure.

"They look up to him like