

For older believers, Santa's magic is ageless

By Annie Gowen
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Galen Henderson is 11 years old, and she believes in Santa Claus.

She is steadfast in this belief, despite taunts from other kids on the bus and in the cafeteria, who tell her: He can't possibly be real. Santa is a big fat fraud in a red suit. How could he get all those presents out to every child in the world in one night?

"I hear it at school, mostly. I just say, 'Sure, if you think that, then you can think that,'" Galen said with an airy shrug.

She's certain they're wrong because she has met the real Santa at, of all places, a garden center in Fairfax County. She has been going to see him every Christmas since she was little. Last year, he remembered that her dog's name is Eli, and he brought her a Wii her family couldn't afford.

Her conviction is shared by other late believers, a small but stubborn band of fourth-, fifth- and even sixth-graders who refuse to bow to conventional wisdom on the question of Santa's existence. Like Galen, many eagerly wait in line for hours to see Santa at the [Merrifield Garden Center](#) in Falls Church each year, jockeying for space with toddlers and their parents in a garland-and-light festooned Santa house.

Santa has been appearing there for more than 30 years and has a slavishly devoted cult following, with many families returning every holiday. He is a wonder to kids and parents alike, with a mysterious knack for intuiting a child's deepest desires and recalling details about their lives.

His ability to instantly summon the names of visitors he hasn't seen in a year or more attracts late believers in droves. Their legs droop nearly to the ground when they sit on his lap. Their scribbled wish lists go far beyond dolls and firetrucks to iPods and digital cameras.

Even the doubters find him difficult to explain. Or to resist.

Before Kate Nette, a 10-year-old from South Riding, sat on Santa's lap, she was full of skepticism. She *had* dismissed him as "a guy in a suit who gets paid to be there." Then he asked how her field trip had been that day. As it happened, she had been on a field trip that day.

"Totally random," she told her cousin Daniel Nette, 12, afterward. Her doubt was wavering.

"Freaky," Daniel agreed. "Maybe he has elves that are spies." He eyed his mother, Janice. "Maybe you're one," he said.

Children traditionally lose faith in Santa at age 8, polls say. But [Charlotte Reznick](#), a child educational psychologist and author of a book called "The Power of Your Child's Imagination," said she often meets late believers in her practice.

"Just as there are children that grow up too fast, there are children who remain innocent for a while longer," Reznick said. "It's sweet." And the parents often get in on the act, she said, "because adults like to believe childhood is a lovely, carefree time. And it's not true."

This year, Galen has watched her parents go through a rocky patch, struggle with money and decide to put her childhood home in Falls Church up for sale.

Given everything she's going through, said her mother, Diane, "why not let her have the magic?"

Santa's spell hasn't been broken for Fiona Penn, *either*. A 12-year-old student at Carl Sandburg Middle School in the Alexandria part of Fairfax, Fiona is aware of the ubiquitous shopping mall Santas and the fact that some presents arrive via a UPS truck, not from the sky. But she chooses to believe that her Santa is different.

"The mall Santas, they change. They get hired and fired. But he's the real one," she said.

Witnesses say that the Merrifield Santa appears not to have aged in 20 years (!) but is thoroughly modern. He tells children that his sleigh has a GPS system. He has a book out. Actually two: "St. Nicholas of the 21st Century" and "Santa's Notebook" -- each \$8 on your way out.

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He exerts full creative control over the decor of the Santa house, filling it with snowmen and trees, an antique sleigh and twinkling blue lights on the ceiling, like tiny stars.

But he is reluctant to reveal much more and worries about his media image, and whether he should be named.

"Can't you just say the man who is responsible for all of this, the man behind it all, is John Buckreis?" fretted the 79-year-old retired horticulturalist.

His chief elf passes a note: *"You work for a newspaper called The Washington Post. Your paper honors anonymous sources. Honor Santa Claus. Don't be a grinch."*

The parents who take their children to the garden center know the drill. Toting sack dinners and their kids' homework assignments, they start lining up more than an hour before Santa appears in a jangle of bells.

They sign the guest book, where Santa, in crooked penmanship, asks them to list "How many years visiting the Real Santa." The Fitzpatricks of Leesburg have been coming 35 years. The Sullivans of Herndon, 34.

Throughout the evening, Santa speaks earnestly to his young visitors from his sleigh, urging them to clean their rooms and quit fighting with their siblings. He sends each kid out with a religious bookmark to remind them of the true spirit of the season.

The line to see him was so long one recent night that some moms and dads gave up after a while, pulling their children to the door as they moaned like foghorns.

After waiting for nearly four hours, Galen finally made it to the front of the line. Santa seemed glad to see her. She showed him pictures of Eli, and then one of the dog before that. She presented her list. He waved off the purple Chuck Taylor high tops but seemed okay with the nail polish set or a "New Moon" vampire T-shirt. And maybe a chew bone for Eli.

Then he zinged her with a speech he said he saves for all the late believers:

"You've been coming to see me a long time. I remember the first time you came to see me. Next year, you probably won't come and see me anymore, and that's okay. That's how life is. . . . But I want you to know that your best Christmases are before you, with your family and friends you haven't met yet."

Galen eyed him solemnly as he spoke but didn't respond.

Not everyone ages out of their connection with Santa. Two years ago, Amanda Brady, 24, who'd visited Santa for years as a child, returned to the garden center with her preschooler. The Woodbridge teacher thought her old friend might have forgotten her, but he hadn't.

"He remembered exactly who I was. He said, 'It's really good to see you, Amanda, how have you been?' " she recalled. "It shocked me. . . . I stopped believing at age 12, but when I saw him again, I didn't know whether to believe in him or not. Something about it was really cool. If he knows who I am, he's gotta have some kind of magic going for him."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.