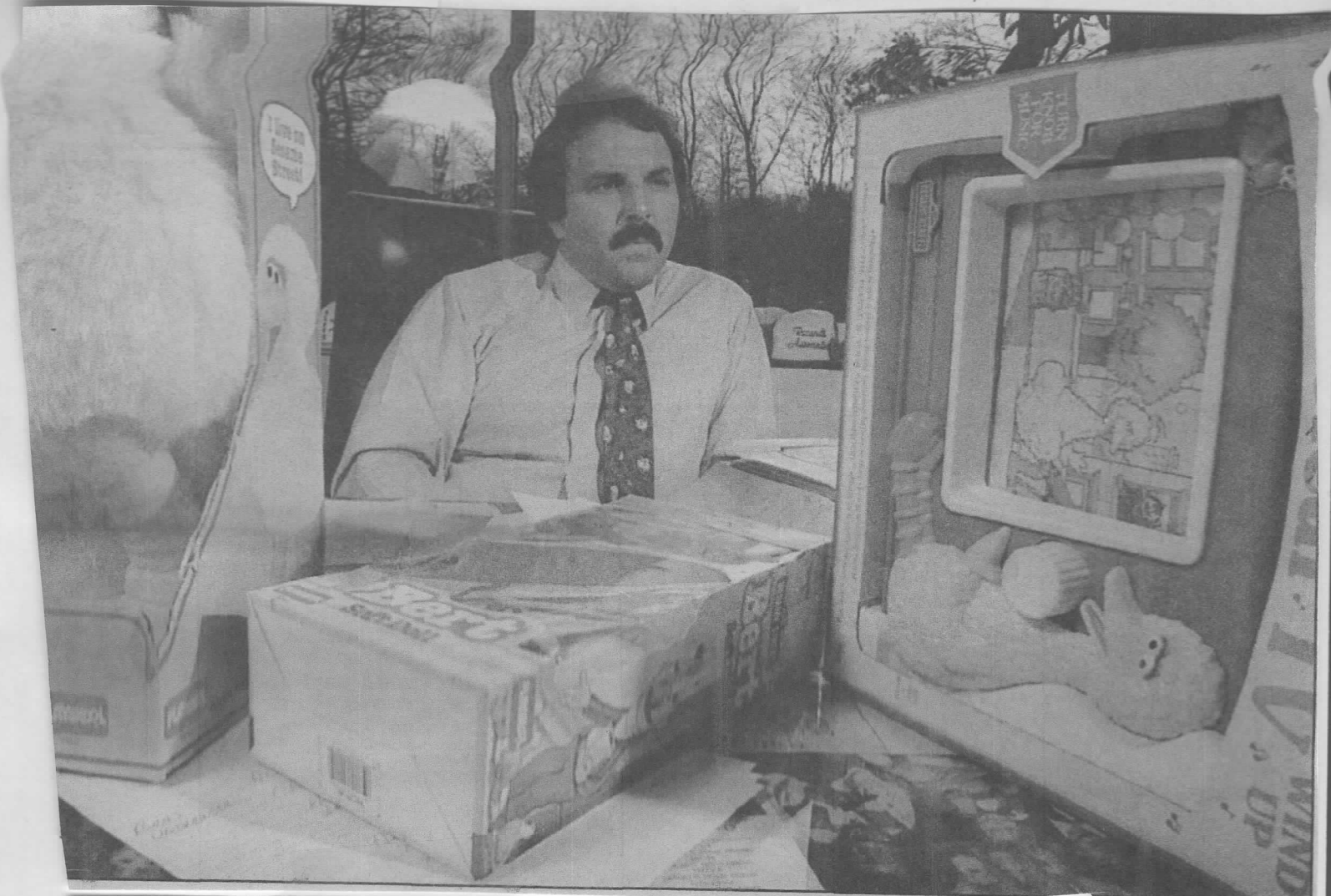


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A Santa Cause: Holiday Magic

Lawyer plays St. Nick to kindle Christmas spirit

By Ellen Yan
STAFF WRITER

The 10 little girls at the party across the street didn't believe in Santa.

So under the night sky, a sly Mr. Claus — a.k.a. neighbor Charles Russo — gave an impromptu street show near his home. The girls, ages 3 to 9, watched in the windows and couldn't believe their eyes. It was Santa stamping in the snow, looking for his

reindeer.

Russo was more used to putting criminals in jail. But a sucker for kids,

he jingled and stomped, then let out a blinding spark with a hand device to cover his disappearance.

Out came the girls to determine whether it was a trick, but what they saw convinced them there really was a St. Nick. On the snow was the evidence, a little bell and a big boot print.

After all, Santa Russo's been a prosecutor and criminal defense attorney who knows the importance of evidence. He's also seen the darker side of life as the assistant director of Melville

House, a former boys' home, and current board chairman of another boys' home, Hope House in Port Jefferson.

But for the past five years Russo has been out to prove that the Christmas spirit doesn't always abandon people

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kicked by life's harshness. He's been decking out in red and white, answering letters to Santa from children of needy clients and former residents of boys' homes and delivering the goods. "Christmas was always a very depressing time of year for all of us," Russo said, recalling his years at the boys' home, the now-closed Melville House. "Regardless of how badly the kids had been abused, there was always a vision: 'Someplace out there, there's my family, waiting for me with this big Christmas dinner and turkey.' Piercing that fantasy and waking up in a boys' home is not where you want to be. The kids wouldn't want to come out of their rooms. They had no interest in the day at all."

Those memories stuck. Russo's wish collection has snowballed from five letters to about 50 this year as his project encompasses two temporary shelters for homeless women and their children in Brentwood.

Russo, used to giving a cryptic "no comment" to reporters, falters a bit in giving details for a Christmas story. Ask him how many children he's helped and he squirms away as if the answers might be used against him by a legal opponent.

The Fort Jefferson resident earned his law degree while he lived at the Melville House in the 1970s and is a partner in the law firm he created. Photos of former street kids and awards from his days as a defensive lineman for the University of Vermont line one wall of his Hauppauge office. Mickey Mouse, disguised as a wizard ready to grant wishes, sits on a corner of his desk. With king's lilies and leaves carved on the legs, it's a desk that would look at home in Sleeping Beauty's castle. From dozens of photos under the glass over the desk, the children he's "adopted" at Christmas beam up at the lawyer.

It'll be the biggest year yet this Christmas for Russo. There's a 5-year-old boy who has "more toys than Santa" but still wants GhostBusters toys; a 9-month-old baby who's "the fastest crawler around"; a 14-month-old girl who always smiles — unless she's wet or hungry; and a 4-year-old boy who draws great pictures and longs for a Bart Simpson doll.

Just as television's Bart Simpson isn't an ordinary boy, Russo hasn't been an ordinary, sappy Santa. First, he ordered his friends and co-workers: no more Mickey Mouse ties and other surprises. Instead, they can take a toy or clothing gift off the wish list. His staff shops for the pages-long list of shoes, raincoats, underwear and other clothing needed. Between cases, Russo squeezes in jaunts to the local toy stores to grant the dozens of requests left using his own money.

"It makes my Christmas very special," he said. "There are so many people who are needy; there are so many people who want to give. It's just a question of matching them."

Then a week before Christmas Eve, Russo finds out who's been naughty or nice. He checks with parents to



Peter Russo runs through his elf routine

find tidbits about the children, using the information to surprise them with Santa's magical knowledge.

This year, he'll have to deck himself out in Santa's clothes for two days instead of just Christmas Eve because his list has grown so long. His young son will don green and red tights and caricatured elf shoes, and they'll ride from town to town in a four-wheel-drive sleigh jammed to the rafters with gaily wrapped presents. The younger children plop down on Russo's lap and tweak his red jacket and jingle his bells as if that would help them decide whether he's *the* North Pole Santa or one of those they've seen at stores.

With children on the verge of deciding there's no St. Nick, the attorney smoothly slips in what he discovered a week before. "How did your brother break his arm? Did you push him?" asks Santa, and he's got the almost-disbelievers doing a double take.

"I'd like to be able to do that to all my clients — get the scoop," Russo wished.

The lawyer's cast this year will feature other elves, too — Russo's son's eighth-grade honors classmates and a magic show for homeless mothers and their 16 children.

When 13-year-old Peter Russo found out about his dad's plan, he knew his classmates wouldn't mind feeling a little strange wearing bright tights, and may-

be feathers in their caps, for a good cause. "If they're not animal activists, they want to help out in the environment, fill up the ozone gap," Peter said about his issue-oriented classmates.

The elves have donated \$100 from their honors class fund raisers to buy Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Batmans, Jokers and other toys; they've penned letters describing hard-working elves and life at the North Pole. Elf Nicole Hohler, 13, of Port Jefferson picked up that her 3-year-old writer to Santa passed a visit to the dentist with flying colors. "Santa and I congratulate you," Nicole wrote, as if the letter really got to the North Pole. "I was never really good at going to the dentist. Yes, elves do go to the dentist because they have teeth, too," the junior high student revealed before signing off. "Behind in present-making."

A 10-year-old girl seesawed on spelling Santa's name. "I love pizza," she wrote. "I'm a little too big for Santa Claus, but a few years ago, I used to love Santa Claus."

She will be one of many hiding behind furniture at the shelters as the elves drag in the gifts and tell Santa it's OK to sneak in. A rumor will be spread that "Santa's in the neighborhood, and he might be by, and we might want to hide and surprise him," said Bruno LaSpina, director of operations at Transitional Services of New York for Long Island, the nonprofit group overseeing the Brentwood shelters.

"They don't really expect all those gifts," said another elf, Joanna Cavanagh, 13, of Port Jefferson, but now "they're going to get all they want. I know their lives are not that great. Maybe some might be sick; they probably don't have a lot of food, clothing maybe."

The experience is what Russo calls "sensitizing" teenagers of the Nintendo games generation who usually only think "me, me, me" while ignoring homeless strangers. "A lot of kids just think these people are no good . . . they're bums," he said. "A big role for me is to sensitize people about what's going on out there. I call it Christmas magic. It keeps them seeing what Christmas is really about."

LaSpina called Russo's offer "overwhelming" because of its scope. "We would have pulled together some gifts, but it wouldn't have been what Charlie's creating," he said.

Better at giving than receiving kudos, Russo wishes the media would aim its holiday spotlight elsewhere. "It's a very private kind of thing," he kept explaining. "I don't don't this to have everybody say it's wonderful."

But the former football player, tall and brawny enough to make a jolly Santa, clearly relishes his growing holiday role.

"Before you know it, I'll have to move to the North Pole," Russo said. "We call it Christmas magic. The magic is in the eyes of the kids — not only the kids you're giving the gifts to, but the kids giving the gifts. I'm a very emotional guy. I get teary-eyed at Shirley Temple movies, so you can imagine Christmas."