

**Santa lets kids climb up as photographer captures the magic moment**

By Jeff Wilkin

**On the Clock: Making merry memories at the mall**

Jonathan Ment tries to get a child's attention with a stuffed flamingo toy while photographing a visit to Santa.

Christmas Eve, and Santa Claus is working.

His friend Jonathan Ment finally has the night off.

Since Nov. 11, Santa and Ment have been guests at the Rotterdam Square shopping mall off Campbell Road. Mr. Claus has been greeting his young admirers; photographer Ment, who lives in the Hunter Mountain area of the Catskills, has snapped pictures of the Claus encounters.

The conversations and candids end tonight at 5 p.m., when Santa leaves the mall. Small girls and boys know he'll make a quick trip to the North Pole, load his sleigh, harness his reindeer and travel around the world delivering Christmas presents to true believers.

At 3:07 p.m. on Tuesday, Santa sat in a comfortable, oversized chair in front of three 30-foot-tall evergreen trees decorated with red and gold ornaments and stars. A dozen smaller trees, all with white lights, were planted in a fluffy field of cotton-like snow that surrounded the man in crimson. Presents covered in red and green paper and topped with gold bows were packed in a small sleigh and stacked near Santa's home base.

### Photo Gallery On the Clock



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Ment said that during late afternoon hours, while most children are still in school, grandparents and grandchildren are Santa's chief customers. Because the holiday operation is located in what is normally the mall's fountain, people who walk for exercise at Rotterdam Square spend some time watching Santa entertain his fans.

#### A memorable show

"For a month and a half, this is a better show than the water fountain," said Ment, 41, a former newspaper photographer and journalist and current professional wedding and event photographer. The

holidays are great for Santa shots — not so much for brides and grooms toasting the future.

"This does a wonderful job of keep me busy during six or seven very slow weeks," Ment said. "During Easter, I'm here with a 7- to 8-foot tall rabbit who doesn't talk. That's a few weeks before wedding season."

By 3:20, he hadn't met any children — or their parents — who wanted their pictures taken with Santa. Several small ones walked down the ramp leading to the throne just to visit and say hello. That was no problem for Ment or his company, Worldwide Photography. "Our company concentrates on the Santa experience," he said. "We want it to be fun for the individual. It's about Santa and the kids."

But Ment and other members of the Santa's Helpers Club take the photos. People are not permitted to take their own.

Some kids who are bashful about meeting the man with all the toys may say hello to Santa several times during the season. Once they are comfortable enough with the experience, Ment said, they'll be back in their nice clothes for the official visit — and some photos.

Ment, dressed in black slacks and long-sleeved shirt and a pine green apron emblazoned with the words "I'm Santa Approved," said some ask Santa for one of the giant Christmas trees at the mall. "We have to ask them if it would fit in their house," Ment said. They're also savvy enough to know the pink flamingo squeeze toy that he uses to attract the attention of small kids is really more like a dog toy.

Some days, business is slow.

## Kids arrive

At 3:30, a little girl named Julia, 21/2, arrived with her great-grandparents. Dressed in pink and black with tiny, shiny shoes, Julia was glad to sit in Santa's lap. Ment began his routine. "Hoo-hoo," he said. "Let me see your teeth!" He squeezed the flamingo and attracted Julia's attention. She jumped off Santa's lap and walked to the bird – fascinated with a squeaking flamingo with an oversized beak.

Julia got her pictures and decided to keep Santa company. The next visitor, Nathan Gibson, 3, of Gloversville, seemed a little hesitant. Julia walked up to the boy, slowly offered him her hand and then hugged him. "This is what we call a super fan," Ment said.

Julia ended up helping him with the camera chores before leaving with her elders. Nathan didn't seem all that anxious for a portrait.

"Let's see those teeth!" Ment said. "Say 'Presents!' Say 'SpongeBob!'"

Deana Tomlinson, 21, Nathan's mother, also pleaded with her son. "Smile!" she said, cheerfully. "Show your pearly whites. Look at him, though. I'll get you a huge Spider-Man doll."

"Say 'Spider-Man,'" tried Ment.

"Is he really this bashful?" asked Nathan's grandmother, Donna Mirabito of Fonda.

Photos of Nathan smiling with Santa were accomplished. People pay anywhere from \$16 to \$46 for photos and photo option packages, big and small pictures that parents and grandparents will make sure are still around in December 2036 and beyond.

By 3:45 p.m., business was suddenly steady. Schoharie's Vanessa Liddle, 10, and her brother Keegan Liddle, 6, were sitting on Santa's lap. Grandmother Claudette Wainwright was looking for the perfect picture. "No squinting," Wainwright suggested to Vanessa. "She squints. She does it all the time."

"Everybody say . . . 'Presents!'" Ment said, preparing to click. "Is this your big brother?" he added, in a question to Vanessa.

"Little brother," said Vanessa, not squinting.

"I knew that," Ment said. "Everybody say . . . 'Christmas presents!'"

He took a couple of pictures and made an artistic suggestion to Wainwright. "Let's try one more and see if we can get you a bigger smile," he said.

Bigger smiles came. Four minutes later, Claudette and her crew were on their way.

## Comic moments

Funny things happen on the job. Earlier this week, Ment said, adults kept showing up for pictures with Santa. Around Thanksgiving – Santa's team's only day off during the holiday season – a customer asked if Santa would be available for Thanksgiving consultations. Ment joked that Santa would not make an appearance, but the photographers would instead be snapping shots with an oversized Tom Turkey. When the customer seemed interested in such a photo op, Ment had to tell him it was a gag.

Sometimes kids provide the gags. Ment said earlier this year, a small boy and his father both had Santa's ear. Santa asked the kid if he had been a good boy during 2011, and the youngster replied that he had been. "He turned to his father with his index finger over his lips and said 'Shhhhh,'" Ment said. "That's the funniest thing I've seen in six years here."

At 4 p.m., 5-month-old Dillon Pettograsso of Niskayuna and five of his brothers and sisters were Santa's guests. Ment took pictures, and parents loved the looks with Mr. Claus. As the kids prepared to move to another spot in the mall, Ment had an idea for their parents.

"Is this the baby's first Christmas?" he asked. "Let's do a quick solo with the baby."

*"On The Clock" profiles people at work in the Capital Region by spending one hour with them on the job. Nominate a friend or co-worker by contacting Gazette reporter Jeff Wilkin at 395-3124 or at [wilkin@dailygazette.com](mailto:wilkin@dailygazette.com).*