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In Santa's presence: Nearly 5,000 visit Santa's new workshop location at Look Park

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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NORTHAMPTON - Colored lights strung up on the Christmas tree behind Santa in his Look Park workshop reflect in the eyes of visiting children.

Mrs. Claus said watching the lights in the children's joyous eyes has always been the best part of her job in the 20 years she's worked at Look Park.

"These kids are so believing," she said. "You forget the problems of the world when you look at their faces."

Nearly 5,000 people came out to Santa's Workshop in the two weeks it has been open. Today, Christmas Eve, is the last day Santa's Workshop is open, from noon to 4 p.m.

The tradition started in the pancake cabin about 50 years ago, continued in the train station and moved this year to its new home in the Garden House because it is larger and warmer, according to Ray Ellerbrook, executive director at Look Park. The train station could only hold 20 people, he noted, which forced others to line up outside for up to 45 minutes.

"People get locked into tradition, but we haven't heard anything but great comments" about the switch to the Garden House, Ellerbrook said.

Up to 200 children can fit inside the Garden House, where Santa and Mrs. Claus are stationed in the atrium.

Girls in pigtails and fluffy coats, boys in blue jackets and boots, and babies holding on to mom or dad lined up to check in with the elves. Some excited and some scared, children waited for the gatekeeper elf to find their name on Santa's good list - or so they hoped.

Annie Stelmokas of Belchertown enjoyed watching the anticipation written all over 3-year-old Brooke and 5-year-old Matthew Stelmokas' faces as the elf flipped through the good book's pages.

"The kids love it," said Annie Stelmokas, who has brought her children to the workshop at Look Park for four years.

The good book lists nearly every child's first name, according to Victoria Sieracki, 18, who was dressed in an elf hat with bells and red top with gold trim. She cut paper snowflakes at her desk decorated with holiday greens, a wooden hammer and unfinished toy trucks, turtles and trains. A sled with teddy bears was on the floor in front of her desk.

Behind her, nutcrackers lined the window sill. Book duty belonged to the elf next to her, who scrolled through the names with her index finger and checked each one to every child's delight.

1 2 3



JERREY ROBERTS

Visitors watch a toy train set Tuesday at the Santa's Workshop in Look Park in Northampton.



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While there isn't a "bad" book at this workshop, "it's fun to see the little kids' expressions and play up their imaginations," said Sieracki, of Easthampton.

Santa "ho ho ho'd" in his big chair as Mrs. Claus knitted a scarf in her rocking chair. White candles, pine cones and holly berries topped the table between them. Santa welcomed his guests to sit on his lap for the annual chat.

Children eagerly answered Santa's questions about their age, school and teacher's name. They smiled wide - showing off missing teeth - when the big man in red asked what they wanted for Christmas. Legos, Wii, Percy the Train, iPod nano and princess dolls were among the requests.

Some kids came prepared with their questions for Santa. Max DiGrigoli, 5, worried about how the sled would get to his house if there wasn't enough snow. Santa assured him he'd find a way. Max's mom, Julie DiGrigoli, said she liked how long her son could talk with Santa and Mrs. Claus.

"It wasn't as commercialized" as malls, said DiGrigoli, who lives in Northampton. "In some places you feel rushed and you can't ask questions."

Not all of Santa's visitors were courageous. Many held their parents' hands or grabbed their legs when Santa spoke to them. The pressure to sit on his lap even brought some to tears. But Santa improvised. He offered a feel of his soft suit or his long, curly beard. He put up his hand and asked for a high-five. If that didn't appeal to them, he waved his hand and hoped for a greeting in return, although sometimes he got the cold shoulder. But most children accepted Santa's gift of an apple.

Train's a-runnin'

Outside the atrium in the garden house, George Reneris, of the Pioneer Valley "S" Gaugers, switched controls for two collectable miniature trains in a display set. Children watched the Polar Express and a steamer circle around a church and various other buildings, water tower and hot air balloon that carried a waving Santa.

A log car carried candy canes, while Rudolph's nose lit up inside a box car. Reneris asked the kids if they could find Rudolph. They jumped up and down and pointed when they found the reindeer.

"He's just hitching a ride, he can really fly," assured Reneris.

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