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Local Santa creates holiday magic at Polar Express and beyond

Ten years of merry memories with Santa Mac



▲ McMullen said his main goal as Santa is to make special memories and connections with children and their families. Submitted photos

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By Janelle Fisher
City Pages Editor

The holidays are a busy season for most — but especially for Jeff McMullen, also known as Santa Mac.

In addition to being a comedy magician, public speaker and professor at UW-Oshkosh, McMullen takes on the role of Santa each year to bring a bit of holiday magic to local children and families and for the past six years, Santa Mac has represented Santa at the National Railroad Museum's Polar Express event.

McMullen said he first put on the Santa suit three decades ago, but didn't start taking the role seriously until more recently.

"I've kind of played Santa for the last 30 years or so," he said. "Every once in a while, a client would ask me to put on a Santa suit and go in and do stand-up, but it was only once or twice a year. But I was pretending to be Santa at that point in a sense. I just put the suit on and I was a body in the suit."

McMullen said that all changed, though, when he was introduced to the world of professional Santas.

"Ten years ago, I was invited down to speak at an international Santa conference in Branson," he said. "And there were a little more than a thousand Santas and Mrs. Claus at this conference and I was brought in to teach communication skills — not as a Santa, but as an entertainer. And I was exposed to the professional Santa world that you would think I would have known of as an entertainer for as long as I was. It was a world that I didn't know existed and they just welcomed me with open arms and I fell in love with

the character of Santa and what Santa represented."

After that convention, McMullen said he immediately got to work figuring out how to be the best Santa he could be.

"So I spent a lot of time in the next two years really studying who the character of Santa is and what he represents and how I can use this character to really bring Christmas spirit to families," he said.

Even with 20 years already under his belt in the entertainment industry, McMullen said he still had a few things to learn from stepping into the role of Santa.

"It really taught me to be a good listener," he said. "To really listen to people and then ask myself once they say something to go a little deeper... Santa has a passport into people's hearts that they just trust and when someone trusts you, they share things that they just wouldn't normally share with a stranger. As an entertainer, I thought 'of course I'm a good communicator.' I was a good sender of the message, but I wasn't always a good receiver of the message. So Santa really taught me to slow down in my interactions and sit back and really listen to what children and their families are saying to me."

That's not to say his time in the circus, as a comedy magician and as a public speaker all played a role in getting him ready to be Santa, as McMullen said each of those roles taught him lessons that he has carried with him.

"My whole career has prepared me for what I think is the reason I'm here," he said. "My circus family prepared me for my performance skills, my comedy magic world has taught me to be able to



▲ Santa Mac has represented Santa at the National Railroad Museum's Polar Express event for the past six years and will return to the role next year. "It's just a great family event," he said. "There's not a lot of things that families can enjoy together in today's world from an entertainment standpoint. Although the Polar Express is geared towards kids, the families enjoy living vicariously through the eyes of their children. That's what it's all about for me — having families together. They come in, see a wonderful show, have some hot cocoa and then they come out onto the train and I get to visit with them and it's just a wonderful experience." Daniel Kramer file photo



▲ McMullen said the most important things to remember when taking on the role of Santa are to be a good listener and to truly be present and enjoy the moment.

entertain and my speaking world has taught me to be able to communicate efficiently. Looking forward from career to career, it didn't really make sense why I would go from this to this. But looking backwards? It makes perfect sense."

For those wondering, yes, McMullen said his iconic Santa beard is real.

"I started growing it right after the convention in Branson about ten years ago," he said. "And this past year was quite humbling for me. At the end of last Christmas season, I lost my ability to walk and stand unassisted and by the end of February, I lost the use of my hands. It was all due to four vertebrae that had collapsed in my upper spine, in my neck. When I went in for surgery, I said 'please, whatever you do, don't shave my beard.' It's a part of me now. Something apparently went a little bit wrong during the surgery and they cut the middle part of my beard... It was so heartbreaking. I had to trim my beard all the way down, so the beard you see today is the beard that I grew since last April."

McMullen said his beard wasn't the only thing he had to gain back after his surgery, though.

"Getting ready for this Christmas season was the best rehab-motivator that I could have had," he said. "Every morning I would get up and they had to re-teach me how to walk, they had to teach me how to do buttons on a shirt again. It was a challenging time, but we had a wonderful

Christmas season." McMullen, who runs courses to train aspiring Santas, said the best advice for anyone planning to suit up is to savor each moment.

"Sit back and take your time," he said. "Enjoy being in the moment, and be completely in the moment. Make that child that you're speaking to feel like they're the only person in the world at that time. Really listen to them and share with them and joke a little bit and just make that experience something special."

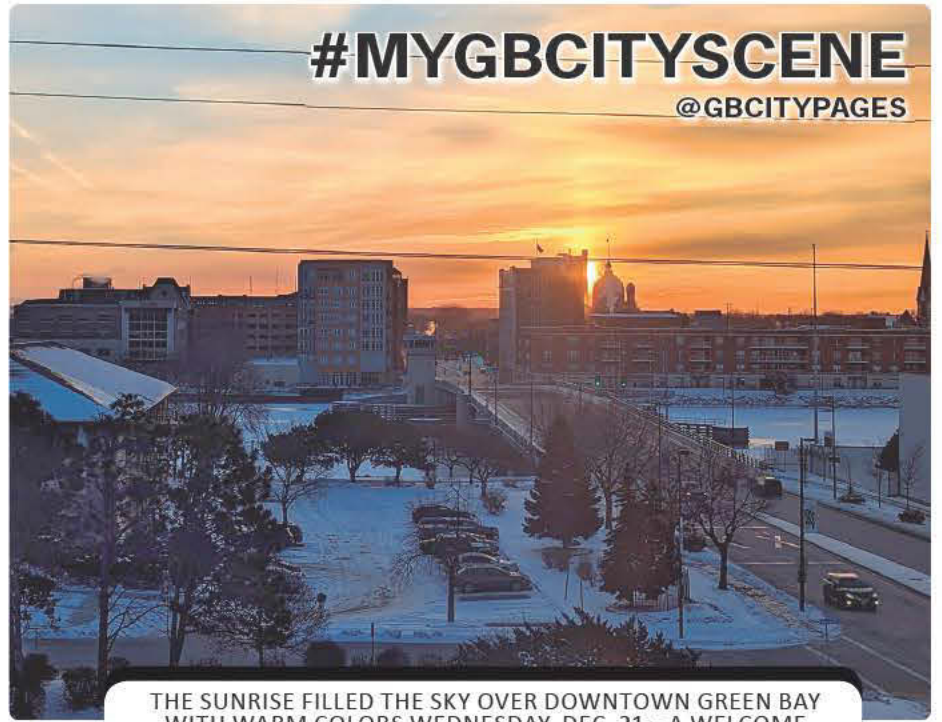
Creating special moments, McMullen said, is his top priority with each interaction he has as Santa.

"Santa takes a lot of pictures," he said. "My goal is to create a memory with each family that is so special that they put me on the side of the refrigerator. That's where I want to be. I don't want to be stuck away in a memory book or somewhere in a drawer. I want to create something that is so special for them that they want to be able to see it each day."

As the holiday season comes to a close, so, too, do the opportunities to visit with Santa. To stay up to date with Santa Mac and where to visit him next season, check out christmaswithsantamac.com. **CP**

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THE SUNRISE FILLED THE SKY OVER DOWNTOWN GREEN BAY WITH WARM COLORS WEDNESDAY, DEC. 21 — A WELCOME CONTRAST TO THE ICY AND SNOWY LANDSCAPE AND BELOW-ZERO TEMPERATURES OF THE NIGHT BEFORE. JANELLE FISHER PHOTO

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