

HOSPICE: Santa's visit lifts spirits



SUSAN FRANKMULLER/SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Santa spread holiday cheer as he visited with Irene Heeter, 82, during his stop at the Kansas City Hospice House on Sunday.

Christmas spirit visits a special place

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH
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When he first started visiting here some six years before, Santa Claus wasn't sure he could truly ho, ho, ho at a place that buys tissues by the truckload.

One might not believe the Kansas City Hospice House, where patients' average stay is less than a week, to be an obvious place of Christmas cheer.

But then, Santa has always had a way of defying disbelief and sadness. His mere spirit looms larger even than his 300-pound-plus self.

Sunday he visited again, just as he has every year since the hospice opened at 12000 Wornall Road to patients who may range in age from five hours to 103 years. Just a few minutes of chatting in a comfy room, usually

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with someone confined to a bed, surrounded by their family, where everyone is facing the most difficult of life's moments.

For almost three hours, the extra-large ho-ho-ho's drift up and down hallways, mixed with the jingling of bells, and the rhapsody of smaller, free-style giggles — more beautiful than music. Children whose grandparents are dying. Children whose mothers and/or fathers work at the center. Even nurses working their shifts stop and smile at the familiar presence.

When Santa enters a patient's room, more than one set of eyes, looking back at Christmas from long ago, is likely to need one of those tissues.

A moment of joy. A dash of happy. And there it is: magic.

Terry Burnworthy, 54, is gazing down, deep in thought when the door fills with red plush. The woman in the bed, Ada Holt, 72, looks like a sister with gray hair and a few more wrinkles. Both women break into grins.

When Burnworthy asks her mother whether she remembered the trip to Macy's both start to laugh. "It was in the 1960s," Burnworthy explains. "I always pulled Santa's beard to check to see if it was real or not."

Her mother nods. Santa gives them a good-humored look that says "naughty."

The big man will only be identified by his nom de Noel. This story is not about him, he insists. Associated with Santa-America, a volunteer service group, he's had grief training and knows one of the big rules is not to break down and have a sick child patting Santa on the sleeve, telling him it's going to be all right.

"I've always been able to make it to the door," he confides.

His heart is open, his belief in all things magical during this season celebrating a holy birth. Something of a super hero to some, when the call comes, he spruces up his Santa belt with the big metal "S" buckle, changes into the plush red and white-trimmed fur and grief morphs into joy, if only for a few minutes.

At the end of one hallway, 91-year-old Bob Edwards sits in his wheelchair. He's been waiting.

"Hello, there," says Santa. "Can I come in?"

The man nods and waves him inside. "I'm called 'Red' on account of my hair," he explains, pointing to his head, a smattering of wiry-gray hairs springing up on his scalp. "Well, it used to be solid red." And he laughs.

Santa eases himself down into a chair and they talk. Red knows he's not getting better. His body is wearing down. Santa brings out a present. A green muffler with red mittens at each end. He drapes it around Red's neck.

He tells them all the same thing, that the present is a hug, for when no one is around. Slip your hands into the mittens and hug yourself, and remember: "Santa loves you all the time."

Red grins. And that's when he surprises the giver. He hands Santa a miniature pair of rainbow-colored suspenders about four inches long. "I made them myself," he says. "I have over 75 pairs. I like to give them out to people."

Santa clips them on his coat, one on each collar, pinching the two sides together. He can eat more cookies this year with them, he says.

Red shares stories about his life, including the sadness he and his wife endured from a miscarriage decades earlier. But then he tells of the extreme joy when a healthy son was born later along with more children and grandchildren. Married for 68 years, he says.

"I appreciate you listening to me, Santa," he finally says. "I know you need to see others. Thanks. God bless you... I've been prayin' every night for Jesus to come get me. He's coming soon."

As if a light was turned on, a little sparkle of those past Christmases shoves the sadness to the corners of the room.

It happens again and again. Like in the room where 99-year-old Agnes Ragland sleeps, with three granddaughters sitting near.

"My gosh, Grandma and Grandpa always brought Christmas to us," remembers Lisa Ragland, whose father had been in the military. "No matter where we were living, they would come. And when they

arrived, Christmas did, too. The women smile and look at their grandmother, lying so still in her bed. An old photo is framed next to her bed of their grandfather.

"Thank you," says Lisa Ragland, as Santa leaves. "This is a

special place, where we can be here together and remember and even celebrate life. It's a hard time, but being here makes it a special time."

More patients, more families, more children in the hallways.

And then his yearly visit is finished. Santa rests before a 10-foot-tall Christmas tree, thinking about all that he saw

and heard.

"I could do this next week and it would be all new people," he says, with a sigh.

But he knows in some ways, these are the lucky families. They have the gift of saying goodbye to each other.

He tells of an elderly lady he met here once who was knitting when he entered her room. "Not some little booties.

No, she was knitting a big sweater for her son.

"Live until you die, that's what she taught me," he says. "These families find ways to celebrate life. They still cry. But they still laugh, too.

"I am blessed to be in their lives even for five minutes."

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