

# cover story



STORY BY BETH MARLOWE | PHOTOS BY TEDDY WOLFF

Elijah Stewart, 5, has just met Santa at the mall. The two didn't even talk about what Elijah wanted for Christmas (Elijah opted not to impart this information, for reasons known only to himself). They just chatted like old friends. ¶ "He felt very comfortable with Santa, which is always the catch and the kicker. He's very believable," says Elijah's dad, Victor Stewart.

According to Elijah, Stewart added:

# 'This is the real Santa.'

For two generations of Washingtonians, "the real Santa" has been the one at Tysons Corner Center, a role owned by a man named Michael Graham since 1989.

Graham, 56, spends most of the year working as a carpenter in Kodak, Tenn. He has an authentic white beard, which he keeps year-round, and ruddy cheeks. His belly is large. You wouldn't be surprised at all if it could shake like a bowl full of jelly.

He laughs easily — though it's more of a giggle than a ho-ho-ho — and his speech is peppered with exclamations of wonder, usually "Wow!" or "Oh, my word!"

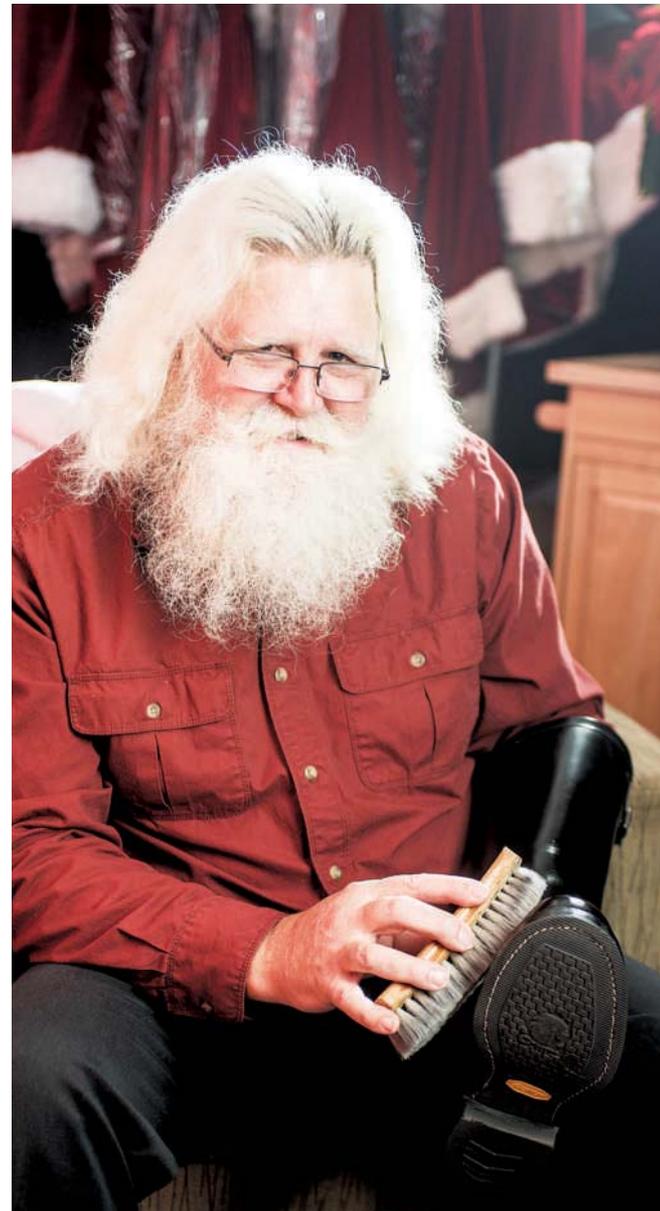
It turns out that a quarter-century as Santa gives you a starring role in strangers' lives. Photos of Graham appear in family albums



or dot the walls of people's homes. "I'm with them at their house all the time, so they just treat me like I'm part of the family," he says.

He's in so many photos that a McLean pediatrician once waited in line for three hours — without a kid — just to meet him. The doctor had a board in his office where he put photos his patients sent him around the holidays. He told Graham, "I've got several hundred up on this board and over 95 percent of all these pictures are of you."

**Hang Out With Santa:** Tysons Corner Center, 1961 Chain Bridge Road, Tysons Corner, Va. Hours: weekdays, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Sundays, noon to 7 p.m., through Dec. 24. Free to visit Santa; \$24.99 and \$55.99 for photo packages. 703-893-9400, [shoptyson.com](http://shoptyson.com).



Michael Graham has spent two decades as Santa Claus at Tysons Corner Center. The beard is real, and he keeps it year-round — but has to bleach it.

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With that kind of market saturation, it makes sense that Graham is starting to meet the children of the children who once sat on his lap.

He recalls meeting four generations of one particular family, starting out with a woman and her daughter and ending up with the woman, her daughter, her grandchild and her great-grandchild.

When they came to see him two years ago, they brought photos of their great-grandmother. "They said, 'We just wanted to let you know that Grandma passed away,'" Graham says. They told him how much joy he'd given her during her life. "And I just thought, 'What a great honor that is,'" he says.

It's not just kids who want to see Santa. A young man once proposed to his girlfriend while she was sitting on Graham's knee. (She said yes.) And an elderly man brought an urn containing the ashes of his brother, who had loved visiting other Santas during his life, to be photographed on Graham's lap.

Sometimes, kids ask Graham for things that can't be given. "Your heart breaks for 'em, because they don't want anything else. They just want Mommy or Daddy, or they want them back together," he says. "I say, 'I know that's hard, but you know what, Mommy or Daddy, they want you to continue on and do the best that you can do.'"

It was 28 Christmases ago that Graham was asked to fill in as Santa in a Gatlinburg, Tenn., Christmas parade (he'd been helping to build the floats). "I thought, 'Sure, I'll help out,'" he says. The next year he signed up with a photo company that was looking for Santas.

He bleached his black hair and beard a snowy white. But did he look like Santa at 30? "Not as much as I do now!" he says.

After working in Nashville, Tenn., and Tuscaloosa, Ala., the company told him they had an opening at a mall in the D.C. area called Tysons Corner.



Instead of posing for photos, William Terry, who is almost 2, reaches for mom Laura Terry.



Patricia Boxwell, 79, left, and Richard Boxwell, 81, have been visiting Santa for the past 28 years, often at Tysons.

Toward the end of that season, mall managers showed Graham the stacks of positive comment cards visitors had written about him. They asked him to come back the next year.

Graham is still at Tysons. He usually stays in corporate housing, though this year he's lodging with a friend. His wife joins him, and when his three kids were younger, they did, too. "They would go to the Smithsonian," he says. "It's a perfect place to bring your kids to learn a lot and bring something back to share with the class."

His kids still come up for a week or so each year and bring their own kids to sit on his lap.

Back home, Graham keeps photos and other mementos children have given him over the years in "a room, like an office, that looks like Christmas exploded in it."

Graham gets a lot of little gifts from the children who come to see him. It's no wonder. Any parent



Chaeli Burns, 3, left, and Quinton Burns, 4, take their turn with Santa.

## All for a Good Claus

Taking your kid to see Santa can be trying for parents. We asked the man himself for some tips on making the experience joyful.

- Go on a weekday. "There's not nearly as many people," Graham says.
- Go in the morning. "The children are fresh and ready to go," Graham says. "And the parents are going to be that much better as well."
- Play it up. Talk to your kids about what they're going to do and how exciting it is. Get them started thinking about what they'll tell Santa they want for Christmas. "Make it a big positive thing, so they anticipate the special time," he says. B.M.

who's taken a child to Tysons at Christmas will tell you that Graham has a knack with kids. He's always holding tiny babies — the youngest was 1 day old. "Parents trust me to hold their precious cargo!" he says. "I mean, my word!"

"She didn't cry for the first time," Kenjewel McCullough, 34, says of daughter Lea'naisa Johnson, 4. They tried to get a photo with Santa at another mall last Christmas, but Lea'naisa was too scared. This year, "she was happy, she was excited," McCullough says. "He called her 'princess,' the favorite word she likes to be called."

The key to Graham's rapport with kids, he says, is "looking them in the eyes and giving them that one-on-one time. They've got your undivided attention, and that's what it's all about."

"The gifts change just because of the technology and the media, but the kids are the same," he says. "They're just full of the wide-eyed wonder of Christmas."

So is he.

**Photos of Graham appear in family albums or dot the walls of people's homes. "I'm with them at their house all the time, so they just treat me like I'm part of the family," he says.**