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Modern-day Santa Bruce McGuy brings sleighfuls of smiles to children throughout the South Bay.

By Michelle Gabriel

Christmas for thousands of youngsters in the South Bay has been made brighter over the years because of San Jose resident Bruce McGuy, a.k.a. Santa Claus. The North Pole Santa would certainly be proud of this local St. Nick whose altruism knows no bounds. The story of how McGuy came to be Santa Claus is very simple. "I asked myself who I was and what I really wanted out of life," he recalls. "When I thought about it, I realized that what I really love are kids, Christmas and being a kid myself."

The little boy found the key to unlock the front door of his home. His parents, both alcoholics, were off somewhere and the boy, alone and afraid, just wanted to be home on Christmas Eve. He crawled into his father's overstuffed chair and looked at the Christmas tree which had been decorated before his mother and father left for the evening. Half watching television and half dozing, the boy was startled by a loud crash as the tree toppled, sending fragile decorations crashing to the floor. Terrified, the boy ran out to the front yard where neighbors took him into their home, calmed his fears, and put him to bed. After checking the house to make sure everything was all right, they gathered some of the boy's gifts from under the tree and brought them to their house so he would be able to open them on Christmas morning.

That's how Santa Claus was born. Well maybe not exactly that way and certainly not that night, but Santa Claus, a.k.a. that little boy, a.k.a. , a.k.a. Bruce McGuy, knew early on, in spite of a troubled childhood, that the magic of Christmas – especially for children – was through the kindness of neighbors and friends reaching out to help one another.

"There's a lot of grief out there and children wind up right in the middle of it," says McGuy, a tall, outgoing, affable 40-something San Jose licensed realtor and painting contractor. "I decided a long time ago that I wanted to make a difference in the lives of as many children as I could, especially those who come from troubled homes."

With that determination and drive, McGuy turned his compassion and concern for children into more than just words. It became his mantra.

Though he's reluctant to give exact figures, McGuy's record speaks for itself. For the last ten years, he has given away 30 percent of his net income to help neighborhood schools, Little League teams and scouting groups. He's donated thousands of dollars to San Jose and Sunnyvale schools for computers and after-school sports programs. He has helped neighbors fix up their homes by painting and performing minor landscaping work for free, given \$100 to a local Cub Scout group when their Christmas tree was vandalized several years ago and sponsored pizza

parties as incentive programs at local elementary schools. As a realtor, he has contributed \$300 to Allen Elementary School for every house he's sold. How much has he given away? "I don't really know," McGuy says, "I never really kept records. I do know that it's probably been enough for someone to have retired on very nicely."

Has his generosity made a difference? Yes, say the overwhelming number of students, teachers, coaches, and other recipients of his unlimited kindness. In fact, McGuy has fifteen scrapbooks filled with thank-you letters from children, parents, teachers and school administrators. And that represents only the notes he's had time to paste in; dozens more fill boxes, drawers and desk space.

When McGuy's children attended Allen Elementary, he was a frequent volunteer at the school. "He donated his time as well as his money from which the entire school continues to benefit," says third-grade teacher Jerry Thomas. "He was always helping out with special programs and school barbecues."

That's only one element of McGuy's commitment to children. At Christmas time, his real persona emerges. He dons his Santa Claus outfit, hangs over 34,000 colored lights around his house, and virtually transforms his home into a Christmas wonderland complete with toy trains, sleighs and a Santa's Mail Box he built for fun. "I didn't expect to receive more than a few letters that first year, and was really surprised to receive almost 300," he says. "Some had real serious questions and if there was a return address I wrote back and even, when possible, tried to fulfill their request."

Enthusiastic word-of-mouth spread news of Santa's letters across the world. The number of missives climbed to 1,000 the second year and reached well over 7,000 in 1996. McGuy personally responds to each letter incorporating his own mixture of sympathy, humor, understanding and advice. When a seven-year-old wrote to tell him she really wanted everybody to get along and love each other, he responded: "Santa is very proud of you and can tell by your letter that you are a very caring young lady. Santa also would like everybody to get along and love each other. As you get older, you will have the opportunity to help fulfill your Christmas wish to Santa. To love someone is better than all the presents that Santa or his elves could ever bring."

The message McGuy sends out, whether he's standing in front of his house greeting neighborhood children and their parents, or reading and personally responding to the thousands of letters he receives, is that Santa cares and that he hears their voices. "Many of the letters I've received would break the hearts of the most hardened individuals," says McGuy, who readily admits that he has been moved to tears on many occasions. "The letters, which so often reflect unemployed dads, illness, alcoholism, abusive or missing parents, make you realize how vulnerable children are today."

One letter told Santa, "I cry a lot, my baby brother died. I wish for you to give all my toys to him in heaven." These heartbreaking words from a young girl motivated McGuy to publish his first collection of children's letters to Santa in 1993. The first line of his response to the child's letter became the book's title: *Even Santa Claus Cries Sometimes*.

“So many of the letters I receive are written in desperation,” says McGuy. “It was my hope that after reading this collection of children's letters, readers would come away with a greater understanding and compassion for children who have experienced the loss of a loved one through death and/or divorce, as well as other hurts and disappointments.”

Some letters display humor: “Dear Santa, Last year you brought me a telephone. I want to thank you. For Christmas this year, enclosed you will find my phone bill from last year. Since you brought me the phone, Dad said you should get the bills. Thanks.” To which Santa replied: “Please leave the phone bill next to the fireplace Christmas Eve.”

Another writer asked: “Dear Santa Claus, My friend told me you laugh all the time. Don't you get the hiccups?” Santa's reply: “Santa is a jolly old soul and enjoys laughing as much as possible. Only once in a while do I get the hiccups. Usually it's Mrs. Claus who gets them from laughing at Santa.”

These light-hearted letters prompted McGuy's second book, *Even Santa Laughs Sometimes*, in 1995. One year later, he published *What Color is Santa?*, based on what he describes as “an eye-opening account of just how our children and their parents relate to the issues of ethnic diversity.” McGuy's first book is illustrated by Jeremy Postlewait, a young California artist and family friend; books two and three contain the delightful drawings of Pat Sunseri.

McGuy has begun work on *Just Ask Santa*, a book which addresses the need for children to have mentors in their lives. “Children are not sure of the guidelines anymore because the rules keep changing. Adults send out mixed messages and kids get confused. Today children are dealing with AIDS, sexual relationships and drugs. I'm seeing more and more letters addressing these topics.”

In addition, McGuy is working on a Christmas story for television, “Christmas in Hopseville,” about the love between families and members of the community who reach out to bring Christmas to two young children in a rural town. “Who better to write a Christmas story than Santa?” he says with a twinkle in his eye.

Being Santa is a natural for McGuy, who has an innate desire to help others less fortunate and to ensure that the magic of Christmas remains intact. Born in Fresno, the third of four children, McGuy says he survived and became the kind of person he is today because of guidance, care and kindness offered by neighbors.

Most of his memorable times were during Christmas. “Even on that fateful night when the tree fell,” recalls McGuy, “Christmas was spent with a loving and kind family next door who often gave me food, took me on family trips, and reinforced the fact that I was loved. I survived my childhood because of them and other mentors in my life.”

McGuy left Fresno just before his senior year, traveling by bus to Sunnyvale. After graduating from Fremont High in 1976, he went into business for himself as a general contractor. “My motto was: if I couldn't fix it, there was no charge.” says McGuy.

He also went into the real estate business where he owned Blossom Valley Realty for several years and, following a divorce from his wife, met and married Joanne, a cardiovascular nurse at Good Samaritan Hospital.

That was in 1986. Since then, the McGuy family, including his and her children – Christopher Charles, Jennifer Lynne, Jennifer Elizabeth and Nicole Marie (their youngest, Rachel Erin was born a few years later) – have made Christmas a neighborhood event. The lights and decorations provide a perfect backdrop for McGuy's Santa to cheerfully greet adoring fans. “Cars stop, children and their parents get out, shake my hand, talk for a while, then drive away,” he says. “It's worth it just to see the happy expressions on their faces.”

According to his wife, busloads of senior citizens from nearby senior centers have often come by to see Santa. “Even if he's not set up in his Santa suit, if he knows they're coming, he'll rush in the house, suit up and run out to welcome them. He doesn't want to disappoint anyone.”

Does Joanne mind the vast amount of time involved or the large sums of money going out each year? “No, because anything that helps children is worthwhile,” she says. And, as far as the money, she responds philosophically, “No problem as long as our bills are paid!”

The spirit of charity is nothing new to McGuy. “I started giving money away as soon as I was old enough to earn it. I was nine years old and remember having two paper routes. I'd buy presents during Christmas for my friends if their parents were having a hard time. I don't see money as anything of value, just numbers. I have as much as I need.”

That's pretty much what you'd expect of Santa, and McGuy fits his alter ego to a T. He's very likable, naturally humorous, and honest to a fault. “I learned early on that a person's word is only as good as his name.” Now, as a contractor running a business out of his home, McGuy works without contracts because “it's all done with a handshake. I've never been to court, I've never been sued. I don't ask for money up front, and the customer pays when the work is done.”

“Everything Bruce does is done out of love,” says his wife. “Love for children, love for people, and love for the Christmas spirit he so strongly believes in.”

So when a young writer asked if Santa was dead, McGuy had no trouble responding honestly to her question.

“Is Santa Claus dead?” I sure hope not. For if Santa was ever to die in the hearts of children and their parents, we would lose sight of something very special. And that's a reminder to love, share, care about others, and give of one's self to those in much greater need. I will always be Santa Claus. I will always love, I will always share, I will continue to care and give of myself to those in greater need. No, Santa Claus isn't dead. If anything, he lives a little more each and every day.”