



For Immediate Release: Wed., Dec. 21, 2016

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Pittsburgh Santa Claus Cherishes Every Child and Every Letter

Bob Roberts has been granting children's holiday wishes for over 17 years... and saving them, too.



Pittsburgh, Pa. — When families enter the Gallery Room at [Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens](#) during the holiday season, they are quick to gasp and grin with delight at the familiar figure seated on the velvet armchair before them. Clad in a bright red suit and beaming ear-to-ear beneath a snow-white beard, Santa Claus has returned to Phipps for another year of what he considers “the greatest blessing” he could ask for.

Bob Roberts has been making children’s holiday dreams come true as the man behind the beard for over a decade and a half. The most rewarding part of playing Ole Kris Kringle for Roberts — and the reason he keeps coming back, year after year — is the precious bond he has with local children and their families. And he has hundreds of letters to Santa to remind him of this bond all through the year. When he makes his grand entrance into the Gallery Room, Roberts carries with him a festive drawstring bag aptly titled the “Wish Bag” for collecting children’s innermost holiday longings and words of gratitude to Good Saint Nick.

“This is one of my greatest satisfactions,” Roberts says, while sharing a very special selection of letters. Written by a young man named Alexander, these letters are mounted on photo collages depicting every visit Alexander has made to Santa Claus at Phipps, from infancy to his early teens. With heartfelt words, Alexander expresses in each note just how much Roberts’ Santa means to him.

“I’ve watched him grow,” Roberts says of Alexander, “and I’ve watched so many of them grow. Every year, there are at least 15 or 20 families that I recognize from years past.”

The letters come from boys and girls of all ages, and Roberts cannot even count how many he has collected over the last decade and a half. He does, however, have plans for the most creative of the

bunch. “One year, children made a long paper chain, and each one of the paper loops on the chain was a note to Santa! This one, I want to hang over the door of my apartment,” he smiles.

In addition to dropping a note in the Wish Bag, children who come to Phipps for a Santa visit cannot wait to hop on Roberts’ knee and chat about what they hope to see under the tree. These conversations are so much more than just a list of potential presents, though, and Roberts makes sure of it. “We talk about school, we talk about their sports and activities, and when siblings visit me together, I always ask if they’ve had any — shall we say, ‘disagreements’ — recently,” he laughs. “But the parents’ favorite thing,” he adds, “is to see their kids’ expressions when I joke, ‘I am going to bring you the greatest present of all: new socks!’”

As the New Year approaches and the holiday season winds down to its end, Roberts admits that there is a bitter sweetness this year, as there is each year. “After each visit with the kids, I look around and think, ‘Where did all the time go?’ And I get a little sad, because I know I won’t be with them for the rest of the year,” he says. “This is the truth: If I hit the lottery for \$50,000, I would keep doing this for nothing at all. It’s just so special to me.”

Roberts says he has learned a lot from children over the years, and if there is one thing that all adults can learn from kids, it’s to rejoice in the simple things.

“Sometimes, adults need to remember what we were like when we were children, the simplicity of childhood. If somebody can tell me of a sound that is more beautiful than the laughter of a child... I don’t know what it would be,” he says. “Laughter is a simple miracle, and there are miracles all around us that we don’t recognize. During the holidays especially, I hope all adults will rejoice in the simple things, like we’re children again.”

Roberts’ Santa Claus will be wrapping up this year’s visits with children in the Gallery Room at Phipps from 11 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Wed., Thurs., and Fri., Dec. 21 – 23. All visits with Santa are free with regular admission.

To learn more about Phipps’ holiday programming, please visit phipps.conservatory.org.

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About Phipps: Founded in 1893, Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh, Pa. is a green leader among public gardens with a mission to inspire and educate all with the beauty and importance of plants; to advance sustainability and promote human and environmental well-being through action and research; and to celebrate its historic glasshouse. Learn more: phipps.conservatory.org.

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