

SANTA'S COVID EXPERIENCE

Santa has always enjoyed his visits to Vienna, but COVID-19 changed the way I interacted with everyone in 2020.

My first visit always begins the Monday after Thanksgiving when I arrive at the annual Church Street Stroll in the antique 1946 fire engine accompanied by helpers from the Vienna Volunteer Fire Department. There is much fanfare as I join the mayor, town council and other local dignitaries on the stage, then walk through the crowd and help the mayor light the tree. Next, I greet and wave to everyone as I make my way to the front porch of the Freeman Store and Museum and spend the next few hours listening to children tell me what they hope to receive for Christmas and having our photos taken together. Historic Vienna Inc and the Town of Vienna work very hard to make all of this happen every year and in the 21 years I've been a part of it, 2020 was only the second time it has been cancelled (the first time was many years ago because of pouring rain.)

In addition to the Holiday Stroll, I return two more times to the Freeman Store and Museum where the Ary Hill Garden Club beautifully decorates the museum. I sit in front of the tree as families come upstairs one by one to talk to me and have their photos taken.

All of this changed because of COVID-19. The Freeman Store Santa visits were cancelled and instead of the very popular Holiday Stroll, the VVFD brought Santa and Rudolph down one block of Church Street where I joined Mayor Colbert in giving the holiday message and then the countdown to the lighting of the tree. This was all being filmed for the beginning of an entertainment program being broadcast the night the Holiday Stroll was scheduled. Instead of having the hundreds of people who usually attend that night, Lily Dunning Widman who organized this and the other events, made sure she limited the number of people to fewer than 25 in keeping with the governor's order.

With the two additional Santa visits being cancelled at the Freeman Store, parents who still wanted to see Santa in person and be in a safer environment could sign up in advance for "Cookies with Santa" and were given time slots to come to the gymnasium of the Community Center. I was on a platform and one family came in at a time, all wearing masks and stayed at least 10 feet away. Parents took photos and filmed their children telling me what they would like for Christmas. Leslie Herman and her team were the ones who coordinated this event, decorated the gymnasium to look like the North Pole and handed individually wrapped cookies to the children as they left. By the way, the cookies were baked and donated by the elves at WAWA and surprisingly were ALMOST as good as those made by Mrs. Claus!

Santa also did ZOOM meetings for the first time ever with residents of Vienna who wanted to visit virtually with Santa. Communication experts, Elf Brandy and Elf Javonta kept everything running smoothly during the two-night event that everyone, especially Santa, enjoyed very much.

Another thing that made 2020 different from all the other years was the shortage of toilet paper that lasted for several months and people wishing they had more. Never fear, Santa was ready to bring some to you in case you wanted to put THAT on your wish list! HO! HO! HO!

Something that didn't change last year was recording my annual holiday message on the Town of Vienna Information Hotline at 703-255-6333. My message for the children was different in 2020 as I explained why I wasn't able to meet with everyone as I had in years past, and I did strive to keep the message upbeat as I've always done.

I was also able to FaceTime several residents in Vienna who had been extra good all year. One of them was 92-year-old Vera Lloyd, who was beloved in Vienna and always helped out at many town events throughout the years. Vera was a big fan of Santa's so even though the Christmas season was over, I Face-Timed with her a few weeks before she passed and her face lit up as soon as she saw me on her phone. Later I received messages from her daughter and another from her close family friend, Joan Dempsey that she was still smiling and talking about it many days later so I will always remember that special visit with Vera and her daughter, Cindy!

I have seen and talked to thousands of children and their parents in Vienna over the years and I always enjoy those visits, especially from families who return year after year and being able to see the children grow up. There are some who started seeing me when they were babies or toddlers and are now in high school or college and still want to see me during the holiday season. After having so many photos taken together every single year, I still wanted to do it again last December even during this pandemic and offered to visit a few of those families at their homes if this was something they too wanted to do. All of them accepted, so I was happy that Geoffrey, Spenser, William, Sarah, Claire, Michael, Aldyn and Alex wanted to do photos with me. What made it different was this time all of us wore our masks.

COVID-19 impacted some families much harder than others, but everyone has been affected by it. It made me happy to see that so many people in the town of Vienna continued to do all that they could to keep the joy and happiness of their annual holiday traditions alive and I want you to know that Santa is looking forward to visiting all of you face to face again and hope we will be able to do it later THIS year!

MERRY CHRISTMAS and HAPPY HOLIDAYS to one and all! I'll be back before you know it! Stay healthy and remember to WASH YOUR HANDS! HO! HO! HO!

Santa Claus

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