

Seth: He goes by many names, Pierre Noel, Sinterklaas, Moosh Krashoon, Papa Noel, Saint Nicholas, Kris Kringle, but whatever you call him, he is a symbol of childhood and of magic and merriment the world over and he is real. Another name some call him is Santa Rick and he's our guest today. Welcome to the show. Karolyn and Kris, over to you.

Host: Today we have Santa. Santa Rick, welcome to the show. How long have you been Santa Claus?

Guest: I've been Santa for 55 years. This is my 56th year. I started when I was 16 and I'm 72.

Host: Did you know Santa as a child and did knowing him or missing him in your life contribute to your desire to be Santa?

Guest: It started out as something funny and now the joke's on me but I didn't grow up wanting to be Santa and most of the Claus family doesn't even know they're Clauses until it happens.

Host: What made you want to be Santa?

Guest: So I was 16 and I was always a kind of out-of-the-box guy and I decided one winter I would just dress up like Santa for my classmates and they'd either think I was crazy or that I was really funny and it turned out they thought it was really funny.

And 16, 17, and 18 in high school it was something fun to do but then after high school that's when I was children that weren't friends or family and it changed the game and that's when really Santa took on a special meaning.

Host: Is the magic of Santa Claus for all children?

Guest: The magic of Santa is for all children of all ages because everyone on this earth is somebody's child and it doesn't matter if you're two or 92 Santa's very magical.

Host: So for those who claim that Santa's not real what would you tell them?

Guest: I would tell them first of all they're wrong and that's okay to be wrong. You know we learn from the time we're born hopefully until our last day and there are things you can learn. Children know Santa's real when they're young and adults know Santa's real when they're old.

It's in the middle when you start learning a lot of information and you start thinking you're really smarter than you are that you sometimes, not everybody, you sometimes believe Santa isn't real. But Santa not only is real but he lives in all of us. A piece of us all of us have Santa in them.

Santa is an amazing guy because he's filled with imagination and hope and we all have imagination and hope so therefore Santa lives in us just for that reason alone and there are many many other reasons.

Host: So what kind of values does Santa most embody?

Guest: Santa is non-judgmental universally accepting.

An example I use is if you were a bank robber and you were in jail Santa would come visit you on visitors day. He wouldn't bring you a gift though because you broke the law. He doesn't care if you're in jail because you had hungry children you were trying to feed or you're just a mean person who likes to rob banks.

He loves you regardless but you broke the law so you don't get presents but he accepts that you are you because we are all who we are. We are all hopefully trying to be nicer and better and kinder because kindness is really what the world's about and believing in a higher spiritual force and leaving the world a better place.

Host: Santa Rick, you are known as the Jewish Santa Claus and you live on streets that are named after Christmas. I mean your town that you live in come together for you?

Guest: First of all it proves that God has a sense of humor but aside from that so I live in a neighborhood called Mary Hills and Mary Hills has streets like Rudolph, Reindeer, Mary, Christmas, Jody, Bramble, Holly and the neighborhood has always been about 95 to 98 percent Jewish.

Originally when it was built it was conservative Jews and the neighborhood has since become almost totally orthodox over the past 50 years and there's a bunch of synagogues there and as a matter of fact my synagogue which is orthodox is the only synagogue in the world and you would think what I'm getting ready to tell you would apply to a form of a conservative synagogue but it's orthodox.

My synagogue is the only synagogue in the world between Mary and Christmas.

Host: What do members of your community think about the fact that you are Santa Claus? Or that you're Santa?

Guest: So I've lived in the neighborhood since October of 63 and I know five generations of people. Well they're not all there but three generations are still there and everyone just knows me as Santa Rick. My family who's watched me grow up they know me as Santa Rick.

I used to be cousin Ricky or Ricky or Rick but everybody calls me Santa Rick except for one child who calls me Mr. Frozenthal because my last name is Rosenthal. Everybody calls me Santa or Santa Rick. My rabbi, everybody.

Host: Oh that's wonderful. Well do you have a school or some kind of a teaching process that you help other Santas some places?

Guest: So as I said, I started out when I was 16, and about 12 years ago—well, actually 13 years this spring—both my parents passed away. Thirteen years ago in the next few weeks... my mother, tomorrow, will be 13 years, and my dad 18 days later.

In the Jewish religion, when you lose a parent you stop shaving, and even though I had a beard that was mostly white, it came in completely white. So, in the spring, almost 13 years ago, I was at Home Depot, in the garden center where you can see through the whole store, and a little boy changed my life and made it where I'm Santa all year round.

I wish I knew who he was—I'd like to thank him—because before that I was just a seasonal Santa. Losing both parents 18 days apart changes your mental state somewhat. I was at Home Depot, one of my favorite places, because one of my hobbies (when I'm not at the North Pole, since you can't grow anything there) is gardening. I was just looking for plants and flowers when I heard this little boy say, "Santa! Santa!"

I tried to ignore him. Mentally, I wasn't in the right place, and you have to be "on" to be Santa all the time. That was the last time I wasn't "on." I turned around, and his dad was leaning in the opposite direction. The boy was jerking on his dad's shirt, but his dad was ignoring him.

I looked at the boy, went over, and right in his face I said: "Don't tell anyone you saw Santa buying tools for the elves here." Then I turned and walked away.

I went through the door into the main store, stopping at every aisle to look back, and the child still had a death grip on his dad's shirt, bent over staring at me like a deer in headlights. When I got to the last row—twenty rows later—I turned left and went to the back corner and stayed there 45 minutes.

During those 45 minutes, it dawned on me: what I really needed to do was be Santa all year round. Even though I had snapped into being "on" when I answered him, I needed that time alone because I was still mourning my parents.

So I decided then and there to be Santa full-time. My life changed. Over the next couple of months, I figured out how to be Santa all year round.

There were jobs all year round. We started a school. I'd been to almost every school that existed, and my wife and I decided we could raise the bar in the Santa industry.

In every school—not just the Santa industry—there's no bad school. You may learn more at one than another, but there are no bad schools; you're learning, that's what you're there to do. Still, we thought we could raise the bar, because the Christmas industry had basically been the Wild West.

So we started the Northern Lights Santa Academy, and we do many things differently. Along with that, we also started the National Santa Agency, so that more people could get professionally trained Christmas performers.

America grew up on a guy in a red costume with a traditional beard. But in the past 25 years that's changed. Now you can get a professional Christmas performer, and I can tell you—it's a different holiday for those who sit with Santa and for Santa himself when there's education and training.

And I do want to add this caveat: just because you go to school doesn't mean you'll make a good Christmas performer. But like any trade, you need to learn the basics and the advanced skills. Without that, it's much harder to be a professional.

A professional in any industry invests in themselves and continues their education. And with Christmas, the season is only six weeks long. Whether you're a butcher, baker, candlestick maker, lawyer, or doctor—if you only do your work for six weeks and take 10 and a half months off, you'll forget what you're doing.

So, in my world—Santa Rick's world—you have to have continuous education all throughout the year to truly be a professional Christmas performer. It's not just about school. It's about going to meetings, gatherings, and all the other opportunities available now that weren't there years ago.

Host: So how would you suggest that people of diverse religious backgrounds might interpret the season of Christmas and Santa even if they have their own holidays and beliefs?

Guest: So let me answer that this way. First of all, every organized religion basically believes in the same thing: a higher spiritual force. Therefore, in my mind — in Santa Rick's world — there's no problem with Christmas being a Christian holiday or a Jewish holiday, because it's more about a season. None of this is about debating belief; it's about leaving the world a better place and doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. With those three basic precepts — and there are more — there are no boundaries of religion, because what all religions teach is simply goodness.

Now, another side note: Christmas is a season. July 4th — it's a day. Labor Day — a day. Thanksgiving — a day. Easter — a day. Christmas is the only one that's truly a season, and it's really the best part of the year for the world. Whether people celebrate on the 25th, or in January (the Greek Orthodox), regardless of when you celebrate, it's a season — and it brings out the best in everybody, because even Ebenezer Scrooge was nice on Christmas Eve.

So there shouldn't be any problem. For those who think, "Well, okay, he's Jewish — what's the deal?" I ask three questions. First: do you have any problem with Jewish people owning toy stores? The answer is always no. Second: do you have any problem with doctors or nurses who are Jewish working on Christmas Eve so the non-Jews can take off? The answer is always no. Third: when you find a child who needs help, do you

ask them what religion they are first? The answer is no. Those three things transcend everything. You can always look to make a problem, but those three things eliminate any problem that anybody can come up with.

Host: Would you ever deliver gifts on Hanukkah like Christmas night?

Guest: If it's the Sabbath, there's a problem; if it's not, there isn't. I'll tell you an interesting story.

I got a call from a fellow — his name is Yakov, heavy Russian accent. This was before COVID, probably eight years ago. He said, "I want you to come on the first night of Hanukkah." I said, "I'm booked that date." He said, "I need you that date." I said, "Come the next night," and he agreed.

I said, "You sound Russian." He said, "Yes," and got a little weird. I said, "I have reason to believe you're probably in your 30s." He said, "Yes, I am." I said, "Then you were probably part of the group that came out of Russia when they let all the Jews out." He said, "Yes, that's true." I asked his last name — he gave it — and I said, "Why do you want Santa to come on Hanukkah to your house?" He said, "I grew up with religious persecution, and I want my children to understand other religions. I don't want to be like that."

I said, "Perfect. Who's coming?" He said, "Just my wife, our children, and me." I said, "Okay, I have a special treat for you." He said, "What's that?" I said, "I'm Jewish." He said, "You're kidding." I said, "No, and not only will I come and talk about Christmas, I'll light the menorah, sing the blessings, and tell you about Hanukkah as well." He said, "Great."

Well, that's where the story should have ended — but the next morning, the second day of Hanukkah, he called. "Hello, this is Yakov." I said, "What's the matter?" It didn't make sense for him to call at eight in the morning. He said, "My house caught fire." I said, "What?" He said, "My house caught fire. I had a wooden menorah." I said, "You don't want a wooden menorah. Are you okay?" He said, "Yeah, we're fine." I said, "All right." He said, "You can't come; we'll do it next year." I said, "That's fine."

About six months later, he called again — and then every two weeks, starting six months out, so I could be there the first night of Hanukkah. Two months before Hanukkah I asked, "Are you sure you want to do this? We had a Jewish Santa coming to light the menorah and talk about Christmas — your house burned down. Are you sure God's not trying to send you a message?" He said, "No, no."

I went — and of course when I got there, there were at least 30 children and a bunch of parents, because everybody had to know about it now. It was really a great experience. The children loved hearing about Christmas from a Jewish perspective; they loved hearing about Hanukkah and having me light the menorah and tell them about the blessings and the Maccabees. It was an incredible evening — really beautiful. They were all Russian immigrants and their children. It was just a magnificent night.

Host: Wow. I bet you've had a lot of those.

Guest: Thank God I have.

Host: I might think it's a blessing that you are a Jewish Santa Claus, in this day and age we need to transcend the boundaries the barriers that we have between each other and you look at the likenesses.

Guest: The thing about Santa in Santa Rick's world is that the core of our being is imagination. Once our mind starts to work, we can imagine anything — there are no limits. Adults stifle this, not only for children but for each other. They teach the word "no." And "no" is perhaps one of the biggest problems — one of the worst things we can do to each other.

When your child says, "I want to go to Bobby's" or "I want to go have ice cream" or "I want to do this" — instead of saying no, what we should say is, "If you eat ice cream, you'll get a stomachache," or "If you go swimming now, you could drown." Explain why. Don't just say no, because no stifles imagination.

Here's the key: in Santa Rick's world, imagination is the stepping stone to hope. If we don't have hope, we have nothing. It has to be imagination first, and hope second.

For example, if you thought our country was going to war and had no chance of winning, what would you do? It wouldn't be pretty. If you're a soldier, sent to the front lines without imagination and hope — the belief that you could win — what are you going to do when you get there?

And when you show up on the field, with 500 of us against 5,000 of them — if you can't imagine we'll beat them, what are you going to do? If you're captured and put in a camp, and you can't imagine getting out or the war ending, what are you going to do?

So imagination is crucial for survival. That's what keeps us alive — hope, which comes from imagination.

Host: Have you ever watched *It's a Wonderful Life*?

Guest: Yes. Yes, I understand you're a very special part of that.

Host: Yes I am. I said the line: "Daddy, teacher says every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings."

Guest: That's really neat. That's very special.

Host: You should know, I feel honored that I was chosen to be that little girl.

Guest: You'll have to send me an autographed picture for my office.

Host: I'd love to.

Guest: What message did you take away from that film?

Host: It's about hope and imagination. That's really what it's about — and kindness. But more than anything, it's hope and imagination. If you can't hope for good things and imagine good things, we're in trouble. It's that simple. Truly, it's global.

Guest: I like how you put it — very simply and easily. And I think that if you wear a red vest and have a big white beard with Santa on your shirt, it's easy to get that message across. People go, "Oh yeah — there's the ambassador of hope and imagination."

Host: So what led you to start the National Santa Agency?

Guest: We started the school to provide more professional Christmas performers. Then we realized we needed to help people get connected with the Santas we had trained.

So we started the agency. Our rules are stricter than any other, and we've developed a very good reputation with Hollywood. We've placed Santas in Lifetime movies, Hallmark movies, national commercials, billboards. We've also worked with Fortune 500 companies — two in Atlanta would be Chick-fil-A and Coke. But we have clients all over the world.

The agency was created because we wanted the schools to help you become the best Christmas performer you can be, and the agency helps people hire the best. It's not just someone who thought it'd be fun — this is very special.

To be Santa, you have to have a healthy love for yourself, and you have to love everybody else. The world isn't perfect, and people aren't perfect, but you love them anyway. That's what it takes to be Santa — because that's who Santa is.

At the North Pole, it's the same. Mrs. Claus is wonderful — she can get a little nippy sometimes, but she's good. And the elves? They're crazy — but they're a lot of fun.

Host: I have to say, in my line of work as a therapist, much of what you're saying is exactly what we try to teach. You have to love yourself, value yourself, so that you can share those gifts with others. There's nothing more touching than being able to share with others — it makes the world go around. My imagination doesn't dance quite like yours — I don't run around on a sled. You're very verbose in that way.

Guest: You could be Santa — we can sanitize you! You've got a beard seed here, we could fix that. But yes, you're a therapist, right? Here's the comparison between what you do and what I do. You work with people you already know, or people who pay you for ongoing sessions — two days, two weeks, two years, ten years.

Santa gets strangers — for two minutes. No matter what they say, we have to respond. We don't know what their agenda is — sometimes it's hidden, sometimes it's real. That's part of the training: you have to learn to address it in two minutes.

Host: I guess, as I was listening to you, I've been inspired. I see a lot of myself in you. So when all the Santas get together — a convention, a school — what do you teach them?

Guest: There are different types of gatherings. Sometimes it's just a get-together with no teaching. At conventions, there are usually a few classes.

At school, though, it's much more intense. Our school is called the Northern Lights Santa Academy — and we chose “academy” rather than “school” because an academy is a place of higher learning. It doesn't mean other schools are bad. There are no bad schools — you may get more at one than another, but you'll always learn. We like to believe our school provides the biggest bang. We do a lot of things differently than others — I believe better, but time will tell. I'd been to almost every Santa school that existed before we opened ours, and I've been to several since.

Host: So Santa Rick, what are some of the most magical moments you've had as Santa?

Guest: There are funny ones, and there are sad ones. A good Santa will cry tears of joy and tears of sadness.

One of the most impactful moments for me goes back eight or ten years. A little boy, about five, came running up and jumped in my lap. His mother, probably about 35, sat right beside me.

Even though the child was looking toward his mother, he was nose-to-nose with me. I asked him, “What would you like for Christmas?”

He said, “A trampoline.”

I said, “Oh my goodness, a trampoline!” — and that's where the story unfolded...

So this little boy says he wants a trampoline. Now, whenever a child asks for something, I have to be careful. There are many things that could happen that prevent a gift from being delivered. Maybe it's in the car while they're visiting me — and the car gets stolen. Maybe it's under the tree, and the house catches fire. So I can't promise any one thing, but I talk to the elves, and they're really good.

So I said, “A trampoline? Oh my goodness. I don't think that will fit in my bag. How about something else?”

But the little boy shook his head. “No, no Santa — not a big trampoline. A little trampoline.”

I held out my arms. “You mean like a three-foot trampoline? One you do exercises on?”

“No, no Santa — not that one.”

I asked again, "Well, what else is there?" He held his hands out like this — and he said, "A little trampoline, this big."

And then his voice changed. His face changed. He was so excited.

I knew I was in over my head. So I asked gently, "Why do you want a little trampoline like that?"

And at that exact moment, he said, "For my little brother."

And his mother whispered, "He lost his brother."

I looked at her. Water was pouring from her eyes — not drops, but streaming down her face. It was beautiful and sad all at once. The boy, though, was so proud of himself. Even though his voice changed, he held his hand up, looking right at me, never seeing his mother.

I said, "Oh, that's very special. I'm going to try to do something for you that I've never done for anyone else."

He asked, "What's that, Santa?"

I said, "I'm going to talk to the elves and tell them exactly why you want this little trampoline. I've never seen one that small, but I know the elves can make it. We'll make a trampoline for your brother. But here's the hard part... your little brother is in heaven. And I've never delivered presents in heaven."

The boy looked straight at me and said, "I know you can do it, Santa."

So I told him, "Then I'll try. I'll leave early, before Christmas, and go way up high, up into heaven if I can get there. Hopefully the reindeer can make the trip. If they need to rest, I'll let them, but I'll try. And if I can, I'll bring your little brother that trampoline."

I've been Santa for 55 years — but that moment? I don't remember anything after it. I don't remember him leaving my lap. I don't remember his mother leaving. I only remember her blouse — soaked in less than 30 seconds. And I remember how proud and happy he was. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the parking lot. Because when something like that happens, you can't drive.

So I called my best friend, Jay. I said, "Jay, I've got a problem."

He asked, "What is it?" I told him the story and said, "Tell me what just happened, because I'm messed up. I was crying too."

Jay said, "It's real easy."

I said, "Come on, Jay. Really — what's going on?"

He said, "It's about humility."

I said, “Humility?”

He said, “Yeah. That little boy loved his brother. He knew how small his brother’s soul was, and he knew his little brother would’ve liked a trampoline. But his soul was only that big around. He just needed a little trampoline for his little soul.”

Jay was right. It was about humility. That little boy understood something that I didn’t.

There’s so much to learn from children, whether they’re four or ninety-four.

One of the funniest moments I’ve had as Santa was with a 106-year-old lady.

We were at a Santa gathering — about 300 of us, all out to dinner in a private room. At one point, I got up to go to the bathroom. Down by the elevator, I saw this woman. She was 106 years old, though you wouldn’t know it at first glance. With her were her children — in their 70s, maybe 80s or 90s — her grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. Four generations together.

They called out, “Santa, come over here! It’s my mother’s birthday!”

So I went over, wished her happy birthday, and even sang to her. Then I asked, “What do you want?” She looked at me, patted my arm, and said softly: “I want a husband.”

Well, that got a laugh. So I went back upstairs and into the dining room. The room was buzzing — 300 people, talking and laughing. I whistled loud, and everything went silent.

I said, “Everyone, this is Mrs. So-and-So. She is 106 today! Let’s sing happy birthday.”

And we sang it the way we do at the North Pole: “We wish you a happy birthday, we wish you a happy birthday, we wish you a happy birthday and a happy new year.” (America has the right words, just the wrong tune — but that’s okay. At the North Pole, we give away everything, not just presents!)

After the song, I said, “Now, this is her birthday wish. She wants a husband. Who here would like to marry her?”

The biggest guy in the room stood up. Tall, broad, with a booming voice — he said, “I’ll marry you!”

She looked at him and said, “Oh my... that one’s too big.”

She weighed maybe 90 pounds herself, so you can imagine the contrast. Then another man stood and said, “Okay, I’ll marry you.” She smiled, thought for a moment, and said, “Maybe I’ll just wait.” It was priceless. One of those moments you never forget.

Guest:

So I said, “Come with me.” I didn’t actually go to the bathroom. I went back upstairs. The door to the room was in the corner, 300 people inside. I whistled real loud — everything went silent. Everyone had been talking and laughing.

I said, “Everybody, this is Mrs. So-and-So. She is 106 today! Let’s sing happy birthday.”

And we sang it the way we do at the North Pole:

“We wish you a happy birthday, we wish you a happy birthday, we wish you a happy birthday and a happy new year.”

America has the right words, just the wrong tune — but that’s okay. At the North Pole, we give away everything, not just presents.

So all these Santas sang to her. Then I said, “Now, this is her birthday wish. She wants a husband. Who here would like to marry her?”

The biggest guy in the whole room — tall, broad, booming voice — stood up and said, “I’ll marry you!”

She looked at him and said, “Oh my, that one’s too big.” She only weighed about 90 pounds. Another man said, “Okay, I’ll marry you.” She looked at me and said, “Maybe I’ll just wait.”

That’s just one example. We get asked for all kinds of things — some funny, some moving.

I once sent a Santa to a home with just one child, about five years old. Santa had a wonderful visit with the mom, dad, and child. As he was leaving, the wife asked, “Santa, will you stand on the porch for one more picture?” He agreed. She went inside, then came back with an urn. She said, “Would you take a picture with my child? We don’t have one of him with Santa.”

So there he was — standing there, holding an urn, taking a picture.

That’s the thing about being a CLAUS member: you are trusted and loved more than any parent or grandparent. Grandparents are loved deeply, but Santa is loved even more. It’s humbling.

I’ve gone into senior facilities where people don’t remember their husband or wife of 60 years. They don’t recognize their children — but they know me. It’s moving, and honestly, embarrassing if their children are there. But it’s beautiful, too.

Sometimes people talk to Santa when they’ve stopped talking to everyone else. Children. Adults. Santa changes lives.

Host: On a personal level, I know you went through a bout of cancer twice — stage four. My goodness. I watched the documentary on it, and you never lost your spirit, no matter what stage or treatment you were in.

Guest: Yes. The first cancer I had was about ten years ago. I went through radiation, which I think is the worst. But the cancer was gone.

Then, just before COVID, I was diagnosed with soft tissue cancer in my thighs. I went through chemo. My doctor is one of the kindest, sweetest men I've ever met. When you get older, you have more doctors than friends — but he's a special man, not just because he treated me, but because of the way he cared.

So yes, I've had cancer twice, totally unrelated. In Santa Rick's world, we're all born to die. What matters isn't how we die, but how we live.

During treatment, I had a regimen. The first days, I would just eat in bed and get up to use the bathroom. Then I forced myself to walk around the living room. The next day, around the yard. Then to the neighbor's. I kept moving, even when I felt awful.

That's important — not just physically, but mentally. You have to keep moving. You have to embrace life. And I love life.

Host: You were also inducted into the International Santa Claus Hall of Fame. That must have been quite an honor.

Guest: Yes, ma'am. The Hall of Fame has fewer than 120 inductees since it started. About a third were inducted after they passed away. Another third have since passed. That leaves fewer than 40 of us alive.

When I was inducted, I didn't know why. I still don't. I'm honored and humbled. I think there are Santas more deserving.

But I looked at the list and realized: a third inducted posthumously, a third now gone. With my twisted sense of humor, I said, "I didn't get inducted because I'm such a good Santa. Either they're going to kill me, or they're hoping I'll die."

Host: Finally, Santa, what's your favorite snack? Is it still cookies and milk?

Guest: Yes — cookies and milk. My favorite cookie? A round one, homemade. You thought I'd say something else, didn't you? But I love sugar cookies.

Host: Thank you for joining us, Santa Rick.

Guest: It's my pleasure. I hope everyone understands: the North Pole is magical all year round. On Christmas Eve, Christmas spirit is at its highest, and that's when the most miracles happen. If you're a believer, anything's possible.

The North Pole isn't just a place for toys — we give away everything: songs, music, love. The only thing we never gave away is politicians.

So, if nothing else, just ask yourself: "What would Santa say? What would Santa do?" And then be magical in your response. Because anybody can change the world.

Seth: Thank you for joining us, Santa Rick. And thank you, Karolyn and Chris. I think I speak for everyone listening when I say we now have a much deeper understanding of what it means to be Santa Claus, what he represents, and how special the magic of St. Nick really is. Happy holidays.