

I was sitting in the lounge at our local YMCA, stroking my grey beard, when out of nowhere a child came up to my chair and gave me a hug. Without any fear or disrespect, he asked me if I had decided to hang out in the warm climate instead of heading back to my home in the North Pole. It took me a few seconds to realize that he had associated my Santa Claus facial look with that mysterious person who had left his favorite toy under the tree just a few days ago.

I had grown the beard to play Santa Claus at the local volunteer fire department and thought this child might have been one of my little wish list presenters at the fire house. So I went back into character to answer his question. "No." I teased. "I am not the real Santa Claus. I am his cousin. He lets me help him out whenever he gets too busy to meet every good boy and girl before Christmas."

The little boy took that answer at face value but continued to ask me questions that had to be answered with great care if I did not want to betray his sincere belief in Santa. He was well-schooled in Santa's life. He knew all about the North Pole and Santa's workshop that was staffed by Elves.

That led him to the next question: Do you work in Santa's workshop during the rest of the year?

I replied, "No. Only Santa's elves are allowed to be in the workshop. I only take wishes from good kids like you and send them to Santa. The elves take care of the rest."

Next question: "Have you ever been at Santa's house in the North Pole?"

"No. There are no roads to get there and it is hidden from view so you can't fly there either. Santa's reindeer know how to find it and they take Santa on his magic slay anywhere in the world he wants to go--even when there is no snow."

Thankfully, the boy's mother came by to retrieve him because I was running out of ways to answer these questions in ways that would leave his admiration for Santa in tact. He gave me another hug and headed off with his mom and two older sisters. I can't help but think that when his belief in Santa is shattered, he will still look back on this experience with fond memories. Not only did that kindly old gentleman share his belief in Santa Claus, but sent him away with a hug and the assurance that he now had a friend who actually knew the real Santa Claus.