

For David Bates, Santa Claus was born on Halloween night a decade ago following Bates's retirement from Saint Francis Hospital. "The day I retired I said that would be the last day I would ever shave again," he said. "It was, too, and my beard came in pure white. So that year I bought a Santa hat and red shirt to greet the kids on Halloween. "When the kids came to the door, they would say "What are you doing here?" and "Where are your reindeer?" and that got me thinking about Santa Claus. After that, I went out and bought a full Santa costume." Soon after, he went to Philbrook Museum of Art to listen to a grandson perform with the Tulsa Boy Singers and visited with the Santa there to get a feel of what being a Santa was like." He said the Santa he met called one day to ask Bates to fill in for him one weekend at Philbrook. "I never heard from him again, and Philbrook has called me every year since to be its Santa Claus," he said. Bates had put on a pot of coffee and was recounting his Santa Claus career in the living room of his east Tulsa home, a room dominated by a huge Santa chair and Christmas tree. Bates was wearing his Santa pants and boots, red T-shirt, eyeglasses and, of course, his flowing natural white beard. For one magical morning, I really was talking to Santa Claus. In the driveway was his four-wheel sleigh, a red SUV with reindeer painted on the sides, a reindeer hood ornament and a lighted wreath on top. "People honk and wave at me all the time," Bates said. He said he gets some jobs through an organization, Oklahoma Santas International Brotherhood of Real Bearded Santas. "Not all Santas in the group are real-bearded anymore but most are," he said. Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa Country Club, Southern Hills Country Club and Marquette Catholic School are among other places where he has heard gift requests from children this year. His wife, Sandy, sometimes tags along as Mrs. Claus. "We did Guthrie Green together this year," Bates said. "It was

four hours of solid children, which was fine. Mrs. Claus loves children.â€• Long before he was Santa Claus, Bates grew up in Nowata and met Sandy at Falls Creek Baptist Assembly camp near Davis, Oklahoma, in 1954. They attended Northeastern State College at the same time and married in 1961. Sandy earned a teaching degree. Bates dropped out when Sandy got a teaching job in Lawrence, Kansas. â€œIt took me 20-some more years, but I finally got a college degree at Langston in Tulsa in 1993,â€• he said. Meantime, he worked in accounting offices for a Kansas agricultural firm that went out of business, then with Cities Service Oil Co. in Bartlesville and Tulsa, first as an accountant and later as a COBOL programmer. He was laid off during the downturn in the oil industry in the mid-1980s. â€œI worked a few small jobs, then caught on at Saint Francis and worked there until I retired in 2005,â€• he said. â€œSandy taught kindergarten for 30 years and now she is Miss Sandy the Storyteller at the library. Weâ€™ve lived in the same house since 1977.â€• The Bates have two children, a son, Michael, and a daughter, Kay. (A note of transparency: Kay is married to Tulsa World Managing Editor Mike Strain, though I was not aware of that when I called Bates for the interview.) Though November and December are incredibly busy, Bates said heâ€™s always a little sad when he knows it will be 10 months before he can be a full-fledged Santa again. â€œThis has been an unusual year, too,â€• he said. â€œKids seem to be more ready to come give me a hug and say, â€˜I love you.â€™ I donâ€™t know why, but itâ€™s true. All in all, this has been a great experience for me.â€• We asked Bates about some of his more memorable experiences. Does Santa Claus have any favorite hobbies? I do have several hobbies I enjoy. One is leather-crafting. I needed a new belt for my costume â€” the â€œcheapâ€• belts did not last through a season â€” and 4-inch leather belts were very expensive. So I learned how to make my own. Since then, I have

made other belts, billfolds, purses, album covers, etc. Last year, I gave away a limited number of hand-carved Christmas cards. What is Santa's favorite movie or TV show? Right now, I am a big fan of the DC comic characters' TV shows, Arrow, Flash and the newest Supergirl. And, of course, the Marvel movie series, Hulk, Iron Man, Captain America are great fun. Especially when they stay with the character developed in the comics, excuse me, comic graphic novels. What is Santa's favorite dinner? This is an easy question: rib-eye steak with all the fixings. Preferably a home-cooked meal. What was Santa's worst moment? I really have not had any bad moments. But the worst time comes on Dec. 26, and you realize it is all over for this year. You are going to have to wait 10 whole months before you are recognized as Santa Claus and you get a great big hug. A favorite moment was when a young girl, 5 or 6 years old, came up and asked "Are you the REAL Santa?" I then asked her, "What do you think?" She went away, and I saw her standing back and really thinking things out. Then she came back and said, "Yes, I think you're the real Santa. You have the big belly, the beard and big ears." What do you say after that? What was your most rewarding moment as Santa? There have been so many sweet moments, it is hard to choose just one. But probably, the time a mother requested for Santa to come to their house to visit their daughter. She had an autoimmune deficiency and could not go to the mall to visit Santa. What are some of Santa's most memorable gift requests? No one gift request stands out, but over the years, I have been told by some children that they do not want gifts, but that they are going to be giving gifts to children who did not have as much. Very commendable. But most of the gifts are the current popular trends, American Girl doll, LEGOs, iPods, iPads, hoverboards, bicycles, etc. The best was not a gift request but a gift received "a

turquoise bracelet, handmade and presented to Santa. My first inclination was to tell the child, "Oh, no, you keep it." But that would have broken her heart. What was Santa's most embarrassing moment? My most embarrassing moment is not fit for publication, at least not in a family newspaper. It is embarrassing, however, when I forget a part of my gear. I was on my way to an event and suddenly remembered I forgot my belt. Turning around means I might be late, but I could not be Santa without all my costume. There have been several times I have become ill and could not attend an event for fear I might infect the children. Early on I did not have the network to find a suitable substitute. That was always hard to do. So now, every year, I do get the flu shot and try not to get sick. What is Santa's favorite thing about Tulsa? We moved to Tulsa in 1969, and we have seen many changes over the years. But I guess what I like about Tulsa is it still has the small-town feel with many big-city advantages. Scott Cherry 918-581-8463 scott.cherry@tulsaworld.com