

A day in the life of an elf

December 25, 2011

IMPORTANT NOTE: Anyone reading this who received a visit from Santa must put down this newspaper immediately and go play with your new toys. I know you kids just love to spend your Christmas morning poring through the Sunday newspaper, but give this column a miss.

Last year, my friend Elizabeth casually mentioned she was employed as an elf for the duration of Willamette Heritage Center's Magic at the Mill like it was no big deal. Oh, whatever, yeah, I'm an elf. Isn't everyone?

When she said this, a shiver of desire passed all the way through me. How, exactly, does one become an elf? Months of training? Elimination ceremonies for all the would-be elves who couldn't cut it when push came to shove?

Slightly disappointingly, it turned out that the main requirement to be an elf was to ask Elizabeth's mom, Kathleen, who is WHC's education coordinator. So, for a year I waited for my shot at David Sedaris-esque elfing. Then on Wednesday, it was time.

There was some disagreement as to whether we were elves or the more generic-sounding Santa's helpers; I came down strongly on the elf side of things. Anyway, three high-schoolers and I were posted outside Santa's workshop, which in another life could have been a sturdy toolshed at a farm in Aumsville. Inside, it was cozy and propane heated, and the outside had "Santa" written in giant, rope-light letters.

Santa, a friendly fellow named Charlie who is Elizabeth's uncle, made a bold choice in that his Santa had white dreadlocks studded with festive Christmas beads and bells.

Charlie was laid back in his instructions. We were to ask the kids their names, then repeat them loudly — because, of course, Santa already should know — and help with crowd control.

Here is something to know, next time you are in charge of a line of tiny people who must wait patiently in the cold for something they are really, really, really excited about: When you say, "Hey, tell you what. Please wait right here for now, and then, when all those people come out of Santa's workshop, you can go in. Santa is excited to see you, but please wait," it will not matter if you put a thousand smiles into your voice, you will still get the kind of look normally reserved for people who throw their trash out the window of the car.

I showed up with an elf name and backstory and everything. Pinenut the Elf went to work at Santa's workshop after getting her bachelor's degree in psychology from Swarthmore, and while she finds her work at the North Pole fulfilling for the time being, she is seriously considering going back to grad school.

None of this came up in conversation, but it felt good to really know where Pinenut was coming from when she asked children what their names were and exclaimed that she had heard Santa talking about them earlier and that he would be so, so happy that they came to see him, but please wait right here for now. Please wait. Please wait! Please wait right here for now!!!

You could spot the troublemakers coming through the line, those kids who are adults in

3-foot-tall bodies and were decidedly not quite sure about all of this.

Several children gave me the side-eye and asked if I was a real elf. Most of them took me at my word that I was, having just flown down from the North Pole that afternoon, but one especially sharp but tiny redhead did not accept this.

"You're a really tall elf," she said with suspicion.

"Some elves are tall. I'm on the elf basketball team," I replied.

She leveled me with a hard, long stare and did not look away, letting the silence speak for itself.

Charlie-as-Santa did a great job of managing expectations: When ponies or dogs were requested, he said that, unfortunately, live animals required forms filled out in triplicate months in advance. Had they done that? Oh, gosh, that's too bad. Well, what else did they want? When they asked for cellphones, he said that because Santa doesn't pay cellphone bills, that stays up to mom and dad.

"Obviously, I just hear the wishes and have no responsibility whatsoever to make them come true, and I don't want to say anything that makes them think it's a done deal," he said. "I think the vast majority of parents are glad that I'm making it clear that there are some things Santa can't bring."

However, he said, overall he loves the job. For him — and me, and I think a lot of people — Santa adds a wonderful layer of magic to what is already a special and lovely time. It was a fun but big responsibility, he said, to help that myth live for the hundreds of little kids who came through his workshop.

And he's right — it was a great way to spend an evening.

When you are small, things feel so limitless and possible. It makes sense that yes, of course, there is a guy who's working hard all year to make you a toy, and he's willing to take a break and say "hi" in person, if you'll just please wait patiently right here.

Pinenut the Elf lives at the North Pole and freelances for the Statesman Journal when she is not making toys. She asks that you please wait patiently for your turn to see Santa, who is just as excited to see you.