

A child shall lead them



'St. Nicholas' emphasizes season's spirituality

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Paul Rayburn has a twinkle in his eye, a ready smile and a gently rumbling voice that suggests just maybe he knows a good joke he'd love to share.

Many people have such attributes, but in Rayburn's case they are especially useful.

Off and on for more than 20 years, Rayburn, a manager at Northern Telecom, Inc., has played Santa Claus for family, friends, neighbors and co-workers.

For three of the past four years, he has also played St. Nicholas at the annual children's Christmas party at St. Bridget's/St. Joseph's Parish, East Bloomfield. He was scheduled to don the clerical garb and white beard to depict the good bishop Dec. 17 at this year's celebration.

"I love seeing the kids' eyes," said Rayburn, who has been a member of St. Bridget's most of his years.

Rayburn first got the call to play the jolly old elf when he was about 18. His debut came at a large family Christmas gathering his grandmother organized every year.

"I was asked if I'd dress up as Santa and give out the gifts," Rayburn recalled, adding with a chuckle, "I had a 7-year-old sister who didn't recognize me."

The 1968 McQuaid Jesuit High School graduate acknowledged that playing the role was not much of a stretch.

"I was always kind of a prankster," he said. "I was not really a bad kid. I was just kind of an imp."

A year of college seminary, three years in the Marines, and work, however, kept him too busy during the holidays for the next few years to don the costume again. But in the mid-1970s he got the urge to become Santa again.

"A lot of my friends had children," Rayburn explained. "I'd go around and see them. I'd make five, six stops."

"I just thought it would be neat for the kids," he added.

He remembered his own experiences as a child on Christmas Eve.

"Somebody would knock at the door, and I'd go right up to bed," he said, noting that he'd believed if he saw Santa that night, he wouldn't get gifts. He also fondly remembers his first visit to Rochester when he about 5. His mother went shopping, and he got to see Santa in the old McCurdy's Store.

Rayburn continued to dress as Santa for friends and family for several years, then stopped again as his three daughters were growing and he became busy at work. He was called back into action by his brother.

"He took his daughter up to see Santa (at a mall)," Rayburn explained. "She was scared to death and



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer
Paul Rayburn, a parishioner at St. Bridget's/St. Joseph's Parish, East Bloomfield, brings a less commercialized brand of holiday cheer to his portrayal of St. Nicholas.

wouldn't go up, so he asked me if I'd do it."

He did, and helped to reassure the girl.

At that point, he started doing his Santa routine regularly again, and was soon in demand. Because he brought along candy and small gifts, he found playing Santa was getting expensive, so he began charging for some events. It wasn't long before he was visiting as many as 30 homes at Christmas time.

Then in 1992, he received a request from Father John Philipps, the pastor of St. Bridget's/St. Joseph's, that he come to the children's Christmas party. But the priest also asked him to change his routine.

"He didn't want me to dress as Santa Claus," Rayburn said. "He wanted me to dress as St. Nicholas."

Father Philipps also gave him videos about alternative Christmases, and a book about Christmas traditions.

"I got a whole new outlook on Santa Claus," Rayburn said.

Rayburn explained that he began to realize Santa Claus had become too commercial. He also began growing uncomfortable with the idea of lying to children, or leading them on to think they will be getting gifts they won't receive.

For the parish, he dressed as St. Nicholas and told stories about the saint and Christmas traditions. And even when he dressed as Santa, he began to change what he said.

"I started talking not so much about 'What do you want for Christmas?' as about the symbols of Christmas from a religious context," Rayburn said. "I'd look through the toy books before the season, and say to kids when they asked for big things, 'Gee, that's an awful big gift. I'll see what I can do, but I can't make any promises.'"

In addition to his annual church visit, he still goes to some homes of relatives and friends who understand his new approach to Santa. But there are "dangers" to that.

"I went to my sister's house, and the oldest (child) said, 'Oh, Uncle Paul is here,'" he recalled with a laugh.

He plans to keep his visits as Santa Claus and St. Nicholas limited for the near future. But down the road he might consider working as a store or mall Santa — while still trying to keep a sense of the spiritual side of Christmas.

"We really should be thinking about the birth of Christ, and not so much, 'Gimme, gimme, gimme,'" Rayburn said. "But I still like to see the looks in kids' faces, especially when they get old enough to know what Christmas is all about."

And with a twinkle, a smile and a friendly greeting, Rayburn may well be part of helping make the joy of the season real for children for years to come.

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