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'Santa Rick' Rosenthal channels the bearded guy all year

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Not everyone can be Santa. But in the Atlanta area, it is a full-time, year-round job for Rick "Santa Rick" Rosenthal to make sure those who aspire to do so learn to do it right.

Performing as the red-suited bearded guy since 1968, Rosenthal founded Northern Lights Santa Academy in 2016. Today, he is dean of the academy, which runs classes for hundreds of Christmas performers each year on topics such as communication, performance skills like juggling and improv, and how to manage the business aspect of the industry, like booking and billing.



BYRON E.SMALL

'Santa Rick' Rosenthal is founder and dean at Northern Lights Santa Academy.

What led you to your career? I started at age 16 in high school as something fun to do for my friends. As I got older, I took being Santa more seriously and began to volunteer as Santa with an

artificial beard. Later, I began attending Santa Claus schools and training seminars, and became a full-time, professional, real-bearded Santa. I have been at this for 52 years and I now have clients all over the country and internationally.

Who was your biggest influence in your career? I have been truly blessed to have many friends who believed in me in the many business ventures I have undertaken. But my daddy was truly the biggest and best influence of my life. He taught me to count only on myself and that I could do anything I could imagine. He gave me a sense of humor, and an instilled in me a curiosity about people and a love of others, a heart for nature and a spirit to excel in any endeavor I involve myself in. I have aspired to live a life that is fun, creative and filled with love. I have been able to “marry up” with my wife, received more than I ever could have realized I would get from my little brother Adam, and have a very special son Sammy who has a beautiful heart. My best friend Jay has also taught me so much about patience and humility and friendship. I have befriended some other wonderfully talented professionally educated Christmas performers, and I am more than blessed to not just call them friends, but family.

What is the biggest challenge in your career or job? I do not consider being Santa a job or a career. Being Santa is a gift from those around you. I am truly humbled by the love and sharing I receive as Santa from each and every child. I have cried tears of sadness and tears of joy with those who sit with me who share their most intimate dreams, desires and life experiences. The biggest challenge is the great responsibility it is to be Santa, and to honor the trust that people place in Santa. Being Santa means you must always strive to be a better human being: kinder, giving, non-judgmental and loving.

What’s the most rewarding part of your job? The ability to share life with total strangers, to grow older with many families I meet and to watch their children grow up each year. To see the true joy

and spirit of pure imagination and hope in the eyes of those who sit with me, and the ability to change people's lives in an instant, is a gift.

What's the hardest business lesson you've learned? That not everyone is honest. I don't understand why some people will knowledgeable take advantage of others. Even though Santa has a naughty list, I want to believe in the good of everyone.

What is the curriculum like at Northern Lights Santa Academy?

Most people are unaware that there is such a thing as a professional Christmas performer. There were basically no schools until 20 years ago. For over 200 years, Americans grew up with a "guy in a red suit" showing up each year at Christmas. Even now, the professional industry is still in its infancy, but I can assure you there is all the difference in the world between a trained professional Christmas performer and someone who just dresses up as Santa. We teach everything there is to know about Santa, including: backstory and performance skills such as improv; how to answer children's questions; how to create meaningful visits for special-needs children; hospital, hospice and senior visits; how to maintain a professional appearance in dress, beard and hair; and the many aspects of running a Santa business.

Not everyone can portray Santa. What characteristics does a person need to have to be successful in this line of work, aside from attending the academy? I believe the first quality a person must have is to like and love themselves, because if you do not like and love yourself, you cannot even begin to possess the basic embodiment of Santa. And the second characteristic you must have is a love for children. Santa is non-judgmental and accepting. Santa is filled with love for everyone and believes in the good of mankind. Santa is encouraging and believes in others. Santa is not a disciplinarian. Santa looks for the high road, and encourages better actions and behavior in others and enables others to see the benefit of such actions.

Please share a story about a memorable event you worked or a person that you met while being Santa. Seven years ago during my appearance at a local mall, I met a wonderful family who had a special son named Campbell, who has several genetic disorders that are life-threatening. While he was only 7 years old at the time, he was already years ahead of his age in terms of maturity and attitude. Campbell understands paying it forward and helping others to the nth degree. Campbell started a nonprofit to help other families with huge medical bills, and he raises funds to provide basics, including clothing and food, for less-fortunate families. I believe this year his charity, Campbell's Crew Cares, is helping over 50 families. Campbell is the most amazing young man I know, and he is only 14 years old.

How do you spend your time when you're not being Santa or running the school?

I am lucky enough to be Santa all year round. I visit with clients of my major corporate accounts around the country and work with other professional Christmas performers to help them hone their skills. When I am not at the North Pole, I love to garden and work with my honey bees. Nature is so amazing to watch, and is a wonderful and quiet respite for me.

What's the first thing you do on December 26 when Christmas is over? Remain hopeful, but feel empty. I miss the many people I have visited with, and their beautiful smiles and twinkling eyes. I miss hearing their hopes, desires and dreams. I miss the giggles of young children sitting before me. But I am satisfied and at peace with the season.

Born in: Atlanta, at Georgia Baptist Hospital

Lives in: North Pole and Atlanta

Age: 69

Current job: Professional Santa Claus

Previous job: Mediator and arbiter

Education: Some college; EMT training; trained mediator/arbiter;
many Santa Claus schools

Family: Wife Tracy; son Sammy, age 23

Hobbies: Metal detecting, gardening, bee keeping

Melanie Lasoff Levs

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