

12/22/2020

## Santa sale connects two towns for extra holiday cheer



Mike Branch climbs into the frame of his giant Santa statue as it is assembled on Dec. 10. This year Branch received help from his son-in-law Kenny Oliveira, holding ladder at left; also helping are Jack Ryan, John Ryan and Eric Dolan. (Breeze photos by Laura Colantonio)

By **LAURA COLANTONIO**, Editorial & Design Team Coordinator

SMITHFIELD – If you’ve driven down Smith Avenue at Christmastime in the past several years, you’ve likely seen a larger-than-life Santa waving at you from his annual post at house number 20, and there’s a good chance the sight brought a smile to your face.

This year, besides bringing a moment of joy to local residents passing by, Santa was also part of a plan to reunite a set of reindeer just down the road in Glocester.

Mike and Susan Branch, of Smithfield, have been displaying the 18.5-foot-tall, fiberglass Saint Nick statue for several years, first at their home, and then eventually relocating it to its current, more visible spot on Smith Avenue, a property also owned by the Branches.

Santa is made up of five separate pieces and takes about five people, multiple ladders, a flatbed truck, and a bit of acrobatics to assemble. The process involves Mike Branch climbing inside of the hollow frame, while others hand him each piece to slide into place. When it is time for Santa's head to be set on top, things get precarious. Branch must shimmy out from beneath Santa's beard at the last minute, feet-first, backward onto a waiting ladder, with a helper guiding him down. And somehow, the group seems to have it down to a science.



Once each piece is securely drilled into place, the statue is further reinforced with cables set into the ground. (Branch said Santa has only been knocked down once, in a very bad windstorm.)

Branch says he believes the statue to be more than 50 years old – having seen one of the exact same type outside of Garden City in Cranston as a child. Santa finding his way to the Branches began with adding it as a decoration for an annual fundraising party that the family hosted with neighbor Jack Ryan and his family, beginning around 2012.

The party grew each year, was moved from their home to the 20 Smith Ave. location, and over the years included everything from home-cooked food, horse and carriage rides and Tony the Dancing Cop, to the Newport Trolley-turned-Polar-Express and face painting. The event eventually saw more than 300 people attend, with guests bringing canned goods and gifts for those in need. One year's party ended with four pickup trucks filled with donations, distributed between St. Mary's Home for Children, Camp Street Ministries, St. Eugene's food pantry, and the St. Philip Church food pantry.

Santa entered the picture in an effort to make the party bigger and better, all in the name of boosting donations for those in need, Branch said. And for "making it magical for the kids that came," he added.

The parties haven't been held in a few years, but Santa returns to his spot each year by popular demand. Branch said people are always asking about the statue, and notes that his grandchildren say the kids on the bus all ask when Santa is coming to Greenville each year.

Branch, a Glocester native, had been borrowing the Santa from the Glocester Business Association, which owned it, up until this year. This year he purchased the statue, securing its spot waving at passersby for years to come. The purchase set in motion a plan to complete a set of reindeer pulling the sleigh of another Santa, located in Glocester.

Kevin Kitson, on the Board of Directors of the Glocester Business Association and owner of Chepachet Village Wine & Spirits, said he orchestrated the purchase of the Smith Avenue Santa statue for the GBA back in the early '90s. He said he "thought it would be a nice addition to the village of Chepachet."

Kitson said the Santa was originally located outside of Murray's store in Warwick at one point. When he learned the statue was up for sale, money was raised from local businesses, with the GBA supplying the last \$1,000 for the purchase.

Since that purchase, Kitson said various holiday pieces have been obtained and displayed in town over the years through funds from local businesses, the GBA, and the town of Glocester.

Kitson said a large Santa and three reindeer were purchased from a man in Burrillville who had "a tremendous holiday display."

But as everyone knows, Santa needs eight reindeer, as well as Rudolph of course, to pull his sleigh.

“This past year with the pandemic – I was thinking we need something for the kids, some sunshine in their lives,” said Kitson. “I said to my wife and kids, ‘I would really like to get the balance of reindeer to make a nice entrance to the village.’”

“I always wanted to have the additional reindeer to finish the sleigh,” he said.

Kitson tracked down a company called Bronner’s that had the exact molds for the reindeer in the GBA’s set, with the cost of each reindeer at \$2,000.

Kitson said Branch had inquired about purchasing the Smith Avenue Santa in the past, but prior to this year had only been allowed to borrow the statue. With money from a Santa sale, along with pitching for some funding from the GBA, Kitson said he thought it might be possible to purchase the remaining reindeer.

Kitson said he made a pitch to the GBA saying that he would like to purchase five reindeer – for a total of eight – and would need them to kick in \$3,000. He said a blind vote was taken with paper ballots, and that while the ballots were being counted Town Councilor Jay Forgue said that if the votes went for approving the purchase, he and his wife Terry would purchase a Rudolph to fully complete the set.

Now Santa, his sleigh, and his full team of eight reindeer, along with Rudolph – what Kitson calls “a spectacular holiday display” sits on the property of Kitson’s store at the entrance to Chepachet Village.

With the sale of the Smith Avenue Santa to Branch, Kitson said, “everybody wins. And the public and kids win even more.”

Both Branch and Kitson said that they felt that with 2020 being a difficult year with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was more important than ever to lift spirits with some holiday cheer.

Branch said the goal was to “try to get a little more positivity – something to look forward to.”

And if the Smith Avenue Santa ever needs a repair ... Kitson noted that he has it covered. He said that the Garden City Santa that Branch remembers seeing as a child – twin to the one on Smith Avenue – was vandalized at one point. Kitson obtained that Santa and keeps it for parts, calling it his “backup Claus.”



Santa's sleigh is now complete, with Rudolph and eight reindeer welcoming visitors to the village of Chepachet.



Santa stands waving, at about 18.5 feet tall, from his post at 20 Smith Ave. in Greenville.

[Log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments