

A loving response to a little girl's fear of Santa Claus

With a little help from grandpa, all's (mostly) well



D.G. MARTIN

Santa Claus was a terrifying puzzle for my daughter when she was 3. She was afraid of the old man with a beard. She let us know that she did not want him to come close to her room when he came to deliver toys on Christmas Eve.

Now our daughter's daughter is 3. Maggie has inherited her mother's fear of Santa.

Each year, the Durham Museum of Life and Science sponsors a "Santa train." Small children and their parents can take a short ride on the museum's small train "to the North Pole" for a visit with Santa. When the Santa Train pulled up to the North Pole station, we watched as Santa walked down beside the train coming closer and closer to our car. When Santa had greeted the children in the next car and he turned toward us, Maggie jumped out of the seat beside her grandmother and me, grabbed her mother, pushed her out of the train, and held on for dear life until Santa had departed.

Even though Maggie had shown her great fear of Santa, her parents planned a Santa party for her friends and their parents. Because I own a fine Santa outfit and am glad to find any excuse to wear it, they asked me to "play Santa."

Maggie's parents thought most of the other children would be glad to see Santa and have their picture taken with him.

But how would we deal with Maggie's fear?

We did a bad thing.

We told Maggie that the Santa coming to the party at her house would not be the "real Santa" but would be a pretend Santa - her grandfather dressed up like Santa.

She reacted with a puzzled look. Then she asked me, "Will you be wearing a beard? Don't wear a beard."

The beard, then, was clearly part of Santa's problem. Maggie doesn't like beards.

"But," I said to her, "if I am going to pretend to be Santa, I have to have a beard, or nobody will think I look like Santa."

Maggie shook her head.

On the day of the party, I took a box with my Santa costume to my daughter's home. "Maggie," I said, "my Santa's costume is in the box. Can I change in your room?"

"Not now," she said, looking around for her mom or dad.

"Right, but I am going to take the box up to your room. Want to go with me?"

She followed me to the room. I opened up the box quickly. "Want to look at his coat?"

She reached in the box and pulled out his coat and pants and then his cap.

"Where is his beard?" she asked with her eyes squinting tightly.

I pulled the beard out of his protective bag and held it up.

"Let's go back downstairs," Maggie directed.

Later, after the other children and their families had arrived, my daughter signaled that it was time for Santa to make an appearance.

"Maggie, I am going to put on the Santa costume," I looked at her and smiled. "Hold me!" she shouted at her dad as she jumped and threw her arms around his neck.

"I won't come down for a while," I said to her. "And when I do you'll know it's me because I will wink at you, just like this." I gave her a big, exaggerated wink. "And when I wink, you wink back, okay?"

She eased out of her dad's arms, stood on the floor, and looked at me without saying a word. In a few minutes, I came down the stairs in Santa's outfit, waving to all the children. Some waved back and smiled. Some just stared and took a couple of steps back. Maggie was back in her dad's arms. From a distance, I waved, and then pulled down the beard to open up my face and gave her a big long wink.

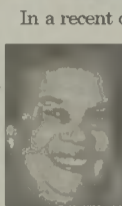
Then the miracle. She winked back. A big, long, exaggerated wink, with a smile that told me she finally knew that this was really only a pretend Santa. Later, while she was sitting on my lap for picture taking, I wondered, "Next year, how are we going to persuade her that Santa is real after all?"

Last year, we had two granddaughters on the train. My son's daughter, Sara, was cautious, but when Santa made his way to her train car, she let him come close enough for us to make a photo of the two of them. Meanwhile, Maggie leapt out of her seat in panic, clutched her mother's neck and would not allow her parents to bring her back in the train until Santa had walked back to his North Pole cabin.

D.G. MARTIN is host of UNC-TV's "North Carolina Bookwatch."

A youth model from the Show Me State

Missouri shows how at-risk kids can be steered straight



MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

In a recent column I wrote about the dangerous increase in the criminalization of our children, asking how we get here. Of course, this leads to a second key question: How do we get out?

Researchers and practitioners agree that mentoring, tutoring, gang prevention, substance abuse prevention, dropout reduction, community service, quality after-school and summer programs and jobs, and nurse-visitation initiatives are among the right preventive investments in our nation's youth. But since 2001, the Bush administration has proposed funding reductions in federal youth prevention and intervention close to 66 percent.

Actual funding has dropped more than 40 percent, with additional cuts being considered for next year - a reckless budgetary decimation of the very programs and services that help keep children out of trouble and on the right path in life. If we know what works, how can we possibly allow children, particularly poor and minority children, to consistently get the short end of the stick of our budgetary priorities?

Eliminating youth services costs us much more in the long run in terms of our criminal justice system, incarceration and other public costs. Conservative estimates place the total savings of diverting one child from a lifetime of crime at about \$1.5 million. Much more importantly, that child has the opportunity to succeed in life - an opportunity that is each person's God-given birthright. There are models for how we can do this for more of our nation's children. The state of Missouri's approach to juvenile justice services gives us one example of how to get things right.

Experts praise Missouri's Division of Youth Services as a "guiding light" of juvenile justice reform, and they credit Mark Steward, the division's recently retired director, with building - and sustaining - the finest state juvenile corrections system in the country. Dubbed the "Missouri model" by reformers in other states, the youth corrections system strongly emphasizes rehabilitating young offenders in homey, small-group settings that incorporate constant therapy and positive peer pressure under the direct guidance of well-trained counselors.

When a young person commits a crime, judges generally reserve commitment to a Division of Youth Services residential facility as the final option for only the toughest of cases - about 1,300 each year. For most youths, "aftercare" consists of a prolonged relationship with a case manager.

Many youths are also assigned a "tracker" - often college students, or sometimes residents of the youth's home community, who meet with them regularly to monitor their progress. Missouri also operates 11 nonresidential "day treatment" centers year-round during school hours, and these facilities offer a way station for many teens after leaving a residential facility.

How do we know Missouri's approach is working?

A long-term recidivism study showed that only 8 percent of youths released in 1999 were incarcerated in youth or adult corrections three years later, while 19 percent were sentenced to adult probation - meaning nearly three-fourths of these youths had avoided either prison or probation for at least three years. Compared with other states, Missouri's results are remarkable.

Besides the obvious future savings that accompany its low recidivism rates, the Missouri model is also substantially cheaper than many of its counterparts around the country. In 2004, Missouri's Division of Youth Services devoted nine out of every 10 dollars in its budget to treatment services. Across the state the annual cost per bed in a residential treatment facility ranged from \$41,400 to \$55,000, while Maryland spent \$64,000 per bed in 2003, and California spent a whopping \$71,000. Even worse, far more young people in Maryland and California end up in prison as adults, meaning those states effectively pay twice as much for inferior treatment.

So if successful models like Missouri's are out there, why isn't the entire nation following them? We know what works to keep our children safe and out of trouble. The question is will we actually provide the support for all at-risk children? Our children deserve the chance to survive and thrive and to be protected from the cradle to prison pipeline that steals too many young dreams and futures.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is founder of the Children's Defense Fund.

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Who's driving this train to New Orleans?

Residents should have opportunity to return damaged city to glory

By Terry Jones

NEW ORLEANS DATA WEEKLY

As New Orleanians are making decisions about the rest of our lives, whether to go back to the city we all love or make our future in another city in America. What is the real reality, meaning will the town we loved ever be the same? And what are the real chances of going back, especially for the lower and middle-income citizens?

If you've gone to New Orleans recently, it is obvious that there is new money alive and well in the city. New restaurants on Magazine Street, contractors in the Uptown area, builders, investors, and many Mexican workers now populate the city. While lower and middle class neighborhoods are still in shambles. What does this mean?

After attending a few of the town hall meetings, it is clear, at least to me, that the mayor, City Council and even the governor are fighting to keep some sort of control and regretfully not doing very well with it. So who is driving the train? Maybe the federal government [President Bush], or maybe private investors who cannot be seen in the forefront. (You know those folks never show their faces!) Whoever is driving, we know for sure middle and lower income New Orleanians, are not their primary concern.

But don't think for a minute, there isn't a plan. There is. The lack of initiatives to attract folks back and the influx of monies from around the world, signal that there's clearly a plan. You're just not in it. So what do we do?

Well, we can continue to beat up on our local elected officials, which seems to me to be a diversion plan. You see in any good strategic battle, you divert the attention one way so that what is really going on is out of sight. You only see and do what they want you to see and do. The question is, will we go for the key-doke, or like Malcolm X, said, be "banibooled or hoodwinked?" Or do we go directly to the source?

The best way to win any battle is to know your strengths. Understanding of the 300,000 people who left New Orleans, 85 to 90 percent of them are lower or middle class. Each one of their families, had to have had at least 500 relatives who did not live in the city. And as they matriculated throughout the country, they impacted more than 200 people per family. Now, the effect, if those relationships could be unified, understanding the impact socially and economically of people who understand the importance of New Orleans to come back, and the need for the government to put New Orleans back in place, could be overwhelming to both the government and private sector.

To simplify it, I mean We the People. And isn't that what America is supposed to be about? Which it makes it very interesting that FEMA will not release the names and addresses of the displaced residents of New Orleans. But it makes sense, doesn't it? How can you ask the opposing team to help you win?

This is a clarion call to all residents of New Orleans and friends and families. It is time to galvanize all of the compassion and turn it into action. It's time to act now! In the next issue, we will post all of the names of the members of Congress along with their contact information. We will also include a form letter for you to sign, cut out and mail to the members of Congress, letting them know that you intend for them to do everything necessary to make it possible for us to return home. We will not accept no for an answer. We are Americans. It isn't about New Orleans People, it's about American People! And out right to be safe, and secure in America. But that can only happen when the true American dream is realized. Basically I am saying that we can't sit here and wait for things to happen, we have to stand up, Americas and make it happen for us all!

When I asked "Who is driving the train in New Orleans, the real question is "Who should be driving?" The answer is of course, We The People!

Only together can we make a difference.

TERRY B. JONES is publisher of the New Orleans Data News Weekly, which was destroyed in the flood as well as his home.

