

*"My wife custom-made a robe to tie in St. Nicholas and Santa Claus into the same person and ... what we're going for as the historical moments and attracting history of Kirksville."* - Elijah Mitchell



Mayank Dhungana/Index

Kirksville resident Elijah Mitchell is playing the character of St. Nicholas this holiday season. Every Saturday afternoon in December he will listen to children's Christmas wishes.

# All Eyes On: Elijah Mitchell

BY ANNA MEIER  
Staff Reporter

Whispers of Christmas wishes drift through the air as rosy-cheeked and red-nosed children bundled in scarves, mittens and miniature coats line up in the Adair County Court House, waiting to sit on the white-bearded, crimson-cloaked man's lap.

This year, the city of Kirksville has selected a new man to play the role of the jubilant giver of gifts, Santa Claus. Instead of sticking with the modern-day ideal of the man, this year the committee in charge of choosing the man behind the beard chose the historical figure of St. Nicholas. They selected 30-year-old Elijah Mitchell, who will be playing St. Nicholas every Saturday in December at the Adair County Court House, providing children of all ages with an opportunity to reveal their Christmas wishes.

Mitchell is a Wyoming native who originally moved to Kirksville for school in 1998. He said that after a short stint back in Wyoming, he moved back to Missouri and has been here ever since.

"For me, it was the people — I had a lot of relationships from when I went to college here,"

Mitchell said. "So I really just moved back for the relationships I had."

Mitchell said he worked with troubled youth while living in Newark, Mo., and although he has worked numerous jobs in the past, he currently is working in Kirksville for a job centered on the city's youth.

"I work with learning opportunities, so we work with youth who have disabilities or who just need supervision in other realms of the community," Mitchell said.

Mitchell said he got involved in playing St. Nick when his wife heard from a friend that the city was looking for someone to take over the role of the jolly Christmas figure. Mitchell offered himself up for the position and played St. Nicholas on Nov. 27 and 28 for his debut this Christmas season, when the courthouse held a continuous stream of children with Christmas wishes, keeping him rather busy.

Because Mitchell does not have a full beard in real life, he said he spends about an hour preparing for the role, putting on makeup and getting dressed.

"My wife custom-made a robe to tie in St. Nicholas and Santa Claus into the same person and ... what we're going for as the historical moments and attracting history of Kirksville," Mitchell said.

Mitchell said he isn't sure how much he resembles St. Nick in real life. He said he often feels as though he gets wrapped up in the involvements and agendas of his own life instead of being as generous as St. Nick was, but he said he really enjoys playing the role.

"I get to be a different personality, I get to act as much as I can as St. Nicholas and just be jovial and be happy and just saying 'Merry Christmas' to everybody and just being able to have interaction with the kids," Mitchell said. "It's fun to play somebody else and just make their day."

"It's really interesting to try and play a person that has different character qualities than myself because I want to play the part of whoever I act the best that I can, and that makes me think about my own life, and St. Nick was a very respectable man from my understanding, so it just encourages me to maybe be more generous like him."

Sherry Stacey, owner of Hidden Treasures on The Square and a member of the committee in charge of picking the new St. Nicholas, said she thinks St. Nicholas is an important figure to remember around the holiday season.

"Too many people don't realize that there really was a St. Nicholas," Stacey said. "Even

people on our board were saying, 'Santa Claus is real?' Well, no, but St. Nicholas was."

Another member of the committee, Beverly Powell, owner of Vintage Books, also said she was excited about the representation of Santa being St. Nicholas this year.

"St. Nicholas was the predecessor of the modern Santa Claus," Powell said. "We just felt like in keeping with the theme that we're working towards in our historic downtown, that it was just a really good fit."

Both Powell and Stacey said they are passionate about the historic preservation of downtown Kirksville and the role this year's Santa will play in that. And they are happy with Mitchell's performance so far.

"He has a very soft-spoken, gentle persona that kids don't feel threatened by," Stacey said. "We do get some criers but not too many are crying, and I think they're responding very well to him. I know people don't like change very much, [but] we have heard a lot of positive responses."

Mitchell expressed sentiments close to that of the historical Santa in talking about his own Christmas wish for this year.

"I'd say, just like St. Nicholas would say, peace on Earth and good will toward all men," Mitchell said. "I have all my needs satisfied, and as for my wants, I would want for peace."

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