

IDEAS

I'm a 'designer beard' Santa. The purists aren't happy.

A great debate about facial hair divides Santas, but it doesn't have to.

By **Michael Sellers** Updated December 12, 2025, 4:00 a.m.



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Michael Sellers, a marketing professional in higher education, performs as Santa in the Boston area.

When I decided to become Santa seven months ago, it wasn't born out of a desire to play a role or the need for a seasonal payday.

It came out of a desire to honor my father, who died earlier this year. He was rarely jolly, but he did have some serious Santa energy, and he made it his business to ensure that we four boys had magical Christmases.

This is what I wanted to capture and share with others when I launched my business, [Tall Santa](#) (I'm 6 foot 6 inches in my boots, a surprisingly strong selling point). I am available for home visits and parties within an hour of Boston, and also virtual visits. As a former stage performer in Manhattan, I took my new role seriously.

For months, I watched YouTube videos featuring Santas around the world. I read books on Santa theory and joined a dozen Santa performer groups on Facebook. I invested in a professional-grade Santa suit, stitched up a flashy toy sack with lots of rhinestones, and bought a walking stick from a woodcarver in Ukraine.

Then I stumbled into the biggest controversy in all of the Santa universe: Facial hair.

Although I could have grown my own, I opted instead for what's called a designer beard. Handcrafted with a [lace front](#) (sheer lace is actually the backing onto which hair is tied) and made from real human hair individually knotted to mimic natural growth, a wig like this takes months to create and involves wrapping one's head in plastic wrap to create a mold for the hair artist (a real job).

The beard, wig, and mustache set that I bought cost \$2,500, a modest chunk of my inheritance. It is meticulously styled and applied with the kind of precision normally reserved for Broadway performers. To the average person, the follicular illusion is flawless.

But I soon discovered that this choice for a designer beard jeopardized not only my hireability but my very identity as a Santa.

There are two distinct camps in the Santa-for-hire universe: the real beard Santas and the designer beard Santas. The prejudice is visible everywhere, from employment ads that request “real beard only” Santas, to agencies that promote “authentic” Santas based on their real facial hair, and to parents who hang up when they hear my beard is artificial.

The Fraternal Order of Real Bearded Santas, a dues-paying trade organization, has its most important requirement right there in the name. They’ve fought for many Santa victories, including COVID-19 protections and separate Santa insurance policies (before the fraternal order got involved, Santas had to [piggyback off policies written for clowns](#)). Those member benefits don’t extend to designer beard Santas, who are barred from joining.

Early on, I asked in an online Santa forum, “What’s your advice for a new Santa when it comes to ordering a professional wig and beard?” A few brave souls mentioned yak hair beards as an option (popular due to their fluffy appearance and affordability). The three other responses were similar to this gem from a longtime Santa on the West Coast: “A REAL Santa wears a REAL beard. Anything else and you’re cheating the children. Period.”

Ouch.

Much of this controversy dances around the fact that “playing Santa” has evolved in recent decades. Today’s Santa is no longer confined to malls and Christmas tree lots. He’s booked for luxury parties, corporate lunches, holiday engagements, and, thanks

to social media, highly curated photo sessions destined for Instagram and TikTok.

Do a quick Google search and you'll find all types of Santas for hire: Santas of color; LGBTQ-friendly Santas; Mr. and Mrs. Claus duos; Santas played by women; even customizable AI-generated Santa performers. On top of all this, innovations in lace-front wigs pioneered by the theater and drag community have changed the game for beard believability and affordability.

All this unsettles the traditionalists. They see modernization and commercialization as detrimental to an intentionally old-fashioned tradition, one that is governed by unspoken inter-Santa norms. For example: Introductions and other mentions include "Santa" before all first names, there's an official Santa Oath, and it is understood that two professional Santas should never cross paths in public, lest they confuse a child.

The author, Michael Sellers, aka Tall Santa. MARK WILSON IMAGES

But the real truth is that Santa has always been about adaptation, especially when it comes to costume and presentation. The tradition of a gift-giving man in red dates back to the fourth century, with St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra (present-day Turkey). Then it morphed, through combinations of various traditions, into Father Christmas in England, Père Noël in France, and the Weihnachtsmann in Germany, each time becoming more jolly — and secular. In the United States, modern Santa was popularized in a 1931 advertising campaign by Coca-Cola.

Beard purists also ignore many aspects of the reality of performance. What do they think about Santas with a little salt and pepper in their beards, who professionally bleach or use spray-on hair pigment? What about Santas who fill in their suits with padding, rouge their noses to emulate a genuine flush, or glue a bit of extra bushiness

to their brows? Are they cheating the children, too?

There is a poetic commitment in maintaining a real beard throughout the year, which I respect. But much of this preference boils down to an unsettling idea: that one must sacrifice to be Santa, and clocking in part-time with a designer beard (or none at all!) doesn't cut it. Santa puritanicalism is a slippery slope and misses the entire point of the Christmas season: to express love, warmth, and generosity.

Yet many Santa forums still feel similar to high school cafeterias. The online Santaverse, largely vintage and members-only, is filled with disclaimers: No egos, keep your comments civil, etc. The "Santa Wars" of the 2000s, in which the leaders of a Santa fraternity in California [turned on one another](#), revealed surprising animosity among performers.

The past seven months have taught me that authenticity isn't just about the beard. After all, children aren't conducting beard inspections. They are looking for magic. They are looking for warmth. And in every single booking I've done so far, not one child has asked, "Is that your real beard?" They ask if I know Rudolph; if I've seen their gift list.

It's about the intention behind the illusion of Santa. Mine has remained simple: to offer the kind of joy my father worked so hard to create for his kids. When I put on the suit, when I glue the beard into place and catch my reflection transformed, I don't feel like an impostor. I feel like part of something meaningful — something larger than myself.

There will always be those who insist that a "real Santa" must have his own facial hair. All I know is this: When a child runs across a room and throws their arms around me,

when someone smiles in the way people only do when nostalgia hits them unexpectedly, when a room feels a little warmer because Santa has walked through the door — that feels real enough.

In the end, the great Santa debate may not be about hair at all. It's about heart. And that can't be bought, grown, or glued.

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