

## Making Santa Accessible

*Giving a true gift to children with disabilities*

**FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES,** even the littlest things that most people take for granted can pose significant challenges. During the holidays, for example, a simple trip to the mall to see Santa can be so daunting for parents and children alike, that most simply avoid it altogether.

That reality dawned on Rich Rosenberg 20 years ago when, while part of a company taking holiday pictures with Santa in the mall, he noted the almost total absence of children with disabilities. "I had not realized the difficulty special needs families are greeted with when trying to access a simple thing like Santa Claus," Rosenberg recalls.

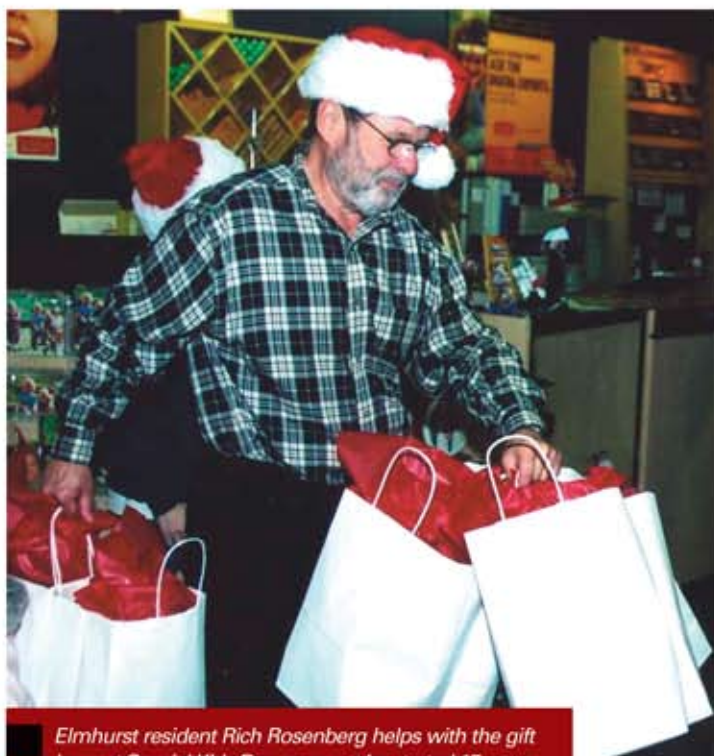
As owner of Elmhurst Camera, Rosenberg decided to do something about it. He started Special Kids Day, an area-wide event designed to provide special needs families the opportunity to attend a holiday party in a safe, supporting environment, complete with photos with Santa, food, gifts and lots of hugs and high-fives.

"The Special Kids Day event is a celebration in a friendly, obstacle-free space that's specifically created for special needs families," says Rosenberg. "It's really about normalizing and giving a child a chance to have life experiences the same as every other child."

When Rosenberg founded Special Kids Day 17 years ago, he counted 30 children in attendance. The event has grown each year, with 350 to 400 children plus parents and siblings expected this year.

"Rich is extremely dedicated, it's his passion, and he's worked very hard to create a place where kids with disabilities can come and experience holiday joy," says LuEllen Doty, chair of the department of education for Elmhurst College, which has partnered with Rosenberg by providing a for-credit internship through which college students help organize the event. A number of area residents and businesses also contribute, both financially and by helping at the event itself.

"Every year he tries to do it bigger and better," says Nancy O'Brien, an Elmhurst resident and parent of a special needs child. "He never says no, he does not see any limits to making it better, and he sees it as



*Elmhurst resident Rich Rosenberg helps with the gift bags at Special Kids Day, an event he started 17 years ago for children with special needs and their families.*

something important and necessary."

O'Brien's son, James, diagnosed with signs of autism shortly before his second birthday, recognizes the event and looks forward to it every year. "Special Kids Day has taught him about Christmas and it gives him the opportunity to experience Santa," says O'Brien, adding that the event has become a holiday tradition. "Our family has been attending the event for six years and it's a huge part of our year."

Though Rosenberg remains the moving force behind the event, it is truly a team effort. In order to play host to hundreds of children and their families, the staff at Elmhurst Camera totally strips the store down to almost bare walls. "In the middle of our busiest month, the employees tear it all down and then stay till very late in the evening to put it all back together for business the next morning," says Rosenberg. "All our employees volunteer, from taking pictures, to stuffing bags, helping guide children around to just laughing together. They come early and stay late and are all volunteers."

### A VERY SPECIAL PARTY FOR VERY SPECIAL KIDS AND FAMILIES

**C**hildren with special needs and their families from across the western suburbs are invited to a holiday party designed specifically for them. Called Special Kids Day, the free, all-volunteer event is designed to provide a safe supportive environment for children with disabilities to visit with Santa Claus, have a free photo taken and enjoy the spirit of the holidays.

This year's event will be held from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Wednesday, December 5 at Elmhurst Camera, 535 Spring Road, Elmhurst. For more information, call 630 530-8000 or go to [www.specialkidsday.org](http://www.specialkidsday.org).



SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

When asked for the inspiration behind his commitment to children with special needs, Rich Rosenberg points to the unique and ongoing relationship between his wife, Barbara, and a young boy named Sam Williams.

A nurse by training, Barbara has worked in the Elmhurst school system for 25 years, most currently in the guided studies at York High School. Early in her employ, she was asked to be the one-on-one aid for Sam, the first student with cerebral palsy to be mainstreamed as a traditional student. The two started together in kindergarten and stayed a team through grammar school, junior high and high school.

Though non-verbal and in a wheel chair with only limited use of one hand, Sam is currently an A student at the University of Illinois in Champaign.

"These two have shown me and others the meaning of living a good life," says Rosenberg. "They both are an inspiration."

"We have had some special moments over the years, but they really weave into a tapestry of joy," says Rosenberg. "It's magic to see, to watch the sign language, a tear of joy and glee as a child approaches the expectation of Santa Claus.

"These kids of all ages each bring a unique style of self," continues Rosenberg. "Some are very shy, frightened even. Others have no real sense of all the fuss but glow in the warmth of attention and caring. Still others come in with physical concerns, but move with all the excitement and thrill of any child to see Santa.

"It is one day, one evening, when we are on our knees, eye to eye with children of the world," says Rosenberg, "reminding us all that these children are a gift to us and our responsibility is to give a little back." — *Natalie Esposito*

# Tour homes that seem to be decorated by elves.


Begin your holidays with Geneva, Illinois' festive House Tour and Christmas Walk, December 7th and 8th. Tour five homes beautifully decorated by... well, not elves... but talented local designers. On Friday, don't miss the Christmas Walk, where Santa Claus and Santa Lucia arrive by horse-drawn carriage to light the 100 ft. Christmas Tree on the Courthouse lawn. Strolling carolers, candy cane pulls, roasting chestnuts, and free carriage rides add to the holiday cheer. This season, come to Geneva, where the spirit of Christmas comes alive.

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