



Joshua Thomas plays a trick on Santa.

## Cambridge Santa is sensitive to all

In the quiet hours before the mall opens, children with special needs meet Santa Claus while staying in their comfort zone

BY SANDRA WALNECK  
PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS

The stores were yet to open for a busy day of Christmas shopping on this December Sunday morning last year, but there was already a buzz of activity in the area of Cambridge Centre Mall reserved for Santa Claus.

Cambridge is among cities across North America embracing the concept of Sensitive Santa, setting aside time when children with conditions such as autism can meet Father Christmas in a more welcoming environment without the noise and commotion of the busy season.

Sensitive Santa is a free event available to children with disabilities and their siblings. Each family receives a complimentary photo with Santa, as well as a small gift to take home.

Santa adjusts his style to each child's needs.

If that means waving from a safe distance, then Santa will gently encourage them to come closer. He stands to the side to let the children find their way onto the sleigh, or behind it, as was often the case on this morning.

"This needs to be an area they feel comfortable in," Santa explains while sitting on his sleigh, waiting patiently for the next family. "I don't take them out of their comfort zone."

First held in Cambridge in 2013, the joint effort between the city and the mall has become so popular it was booked solid last year. More than 50 families registered to attend one of the three two-hour sessions on consecutive Sunday mornings in December. A fourth date has been added this year to help reduce the waitlist.

The atmosphere is upbeat, but peaceful. There are no loud carols playing, and families are scheduled to see Santa at individual times. Before and after the visit, there are crafts to make, and a soft

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play mat has been set up with foam blocks to stack.

"This is a sensory-friendly visit with Santa with lower lighting and a quieter environment," says Robyn Hyland, inclusion co-ordinator for the City of Cambridge.

There are, however, plenty of delighted squeals, smiles and laughter. Santa is as warm and welcoming as can be, but he refrains from loud "Ho, Ho, Hos."

Make no mistake, says Santa, these kids are the same as any others. "And their requests for toys are just the same."

"I have autism," Joshua Thomas states matter-of-factly. He's leaned closer to confide in me as we discuss a mutually favourite Christmas movie.

A bright, engaging child, 10-year-old Joshua had just delivered a handmade ornament to Santa over at the Christmas

station. "He said I made his and Mrs. Claus' Christmas," Joshua announces.

Along with Joshua's parents, Frank and Paulette, we are sitting at a craft table. Joshua's enthusiasm is infectious, and Paulette is delighted to take part in this special morning. She is also here as a volunteer with Autism Ontario, although the event is not specifically for this group.

Joshua has no trouble approaching Santa and his helpers, and enjoys the hugs and high fives. One young girl, however, is more cautious.

Hyland watches as Sandra Moyanski, 9, and her support dog, Porter, skirt Santa's station. Although she smiles and is happy to be there, Sandra would prefer to keep a comfortable distance from the big guy.

"Some children can take many attempts to see Santa in one visit while others will go up right away," Hyland says.

To prepare children for the event and to reduce anxiety, Hyland says families are sent a booklet that provides visuals on how the event will take place.

Hyland emphasizes how difficult it can be to just get out the door for some families. "Someone might be having a bad morning, or not able to take their medication," she explains as they wait for one family to arrive. Organizers do their best to squeeze everyone in, even if people are delayed.

Kane Hiuser, 7, and his four-year-old brother, Carter, goof around with Santa while they get their photos taken. In one pose, the two boys lean over the back of the sleigh wearing giant grins.

Their mother, Amber, is able to relax and enjoy the moment. At the age of 4½, Kane was diagnosed with high-functioning autism. Any change of routine or new

experience can cause him a great deal of anxiety.

Although the boys attended the previous year, Kane lives very much in the moment and cannot recall the experience as a happy one. "This morning I told Kane that it was OK if you don't want to talk to Santa," Amber says. "He made the decision on his own."

Amber is especially happy that Carter can join in the fun.

"Because it is easier to stay home, we often don't go to places," Amber says. "Kane can get sensory overload. The (Santa) station is in the middle of the mall, and there is the noise from the train. And kids with sensory issues don't wait in line."

Soft headphones are available for children who can feel overwhelmed by noise, but Kane is content without them today. Even if Kane did melt down, Amber was not



Maria Broda and her brother, Cash, enjoy a visit with Santa.

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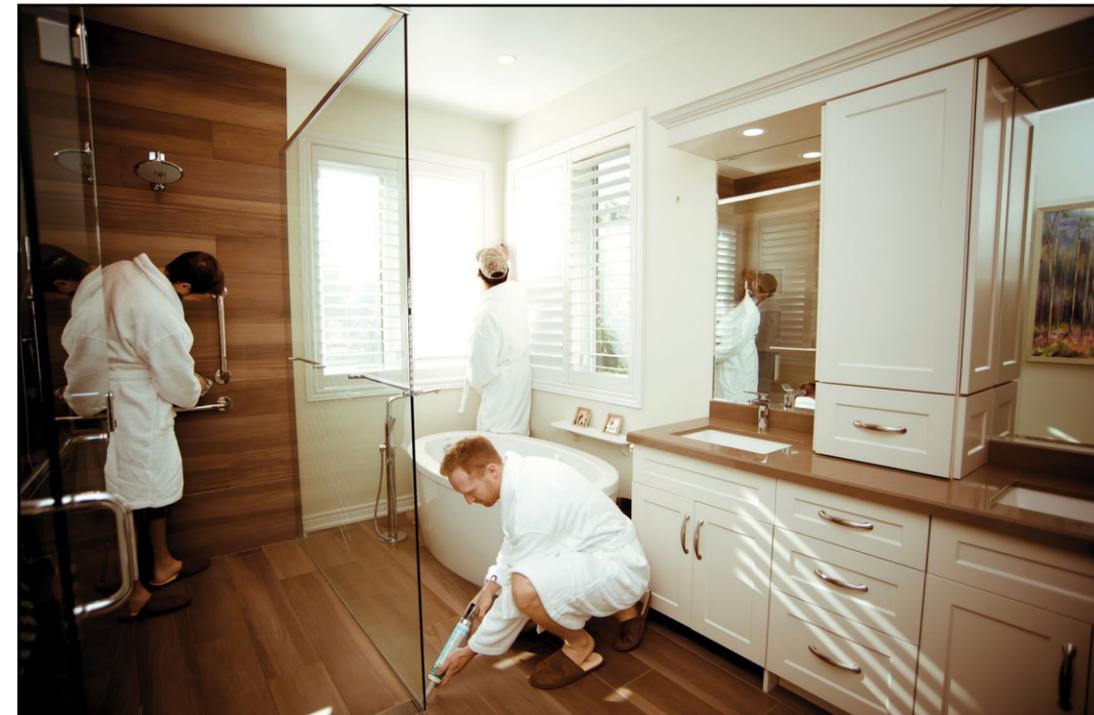


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Joshua Thomas  
gets a hug from Santa.

become more aware of her surroundings.

“She now gets self-conscious if people are staring at her,” Judy says.

Knowing Maria can visit with Santa without that extra pressure is wonderful.

Years past have not been as easy.

“She has so much emotion,” Judy says.

“They are all coming at her and she can’t control it so she acts out.” This has resulted in people making unkind comments about Maria “ruining the experience” for other children.

Unlike Kane, Maria remembers past experiences and can retain the smallest detail. Judy affectionately compares her to Dustin Hoffman’s character, Raymond, in the movie “Rain Man.” Knowing that she was coming back this year to the Sensitive Santa event was a highlight in their schedule.

Judy is grateful for the opportunities available in Cambridge for Maria to participate in sports and social activities. “There is so much support in our region,” says Judy. Maria is in hockey and goes to Sunrise, a therapeutic horseback riding and learning centre in Puslinch.

Maria’s younger brother, Cash, comes over to talk about their next stop, a Christmas Tree Farm. Although he is just seven, Cash is articulate and composed. He’s also very protective of Maria, Judy says.

“He is happy to support her. He wants to be the big brother and he wants to help her out.”

Santa doesn’t forget Cash and the other siblings. Each one has the opportunity to share their wishes for a gift and receive a hug or a high five. Even the older ones get in on the act and Santa will gently cajole reluctant teenagers to take part in the family photo.

He also takes extra time with the parents to offer support, encouragement and warm hugs.

“It still tugs at Santa’s heart,” he says quietly as he watches the children.

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concerned.

“All of the people here will understand,” she says. “And we get a picture for free! We have lots of extra costs with Kane.”

As Kane wanders over to see what his mom is doing, Carter zips past on his way to the play mat. Heading in the other direction and straight to Santa is newly arrived Maria Broda.

The three young women at the welcome table smile as they watch Maria joyfully greet Santa. Shannon Kaufman and Jennifer Campbell, inclusion facilitators, and volunteer Medha Amin met 13-year-old Maria at a weekly get-together called “Just Hanging Out,” which is for young teenagers with developmental delays.

Maria’s mother, Judy, says her daughter has moderate autism and developmental delays. As she has grown older, Maria has

## SENSITIVE SANTA

Registration is open for this year’s Sensitive Santa event in Cambridge. The dates are Nov. 26, Dec. 3, 10 and 17.

Families can register by calling 519-740-4680, ext. 4292, or by emailing Robyn Hyland at [hylandr@cambridge.ca](mailto:hylandr@cambridge.ca).

Sensory-friendly Santa services are also provided at other area malls, including Conestoga Mall in Waterloo and Stone Road Mall in Guelph.

Visit [conestogamall.com](http://conestogamall.com) and [stoneroadmall.ca](http://stoneroadmall.ca) for information.

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