

# Zoom with Santa? Not for everyone

## Plexiglas allows families to have in-person visits with the man himself

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Santa's lap may not be free, but Rochester families are still visiting the jolly old elf this season.

ABC & Toy Zone's Santa Claus sits behind a Plexiglas barrier, bookended by evergreen trees as he listens to the children's Christmas lists.

On Saturday, Brantley Pahl, 4, asked Santa for Paw Patrol toys, Play-Doh, and monster trucks this Christmas. During his visit, he promised a variety of snacks for Santa when he visits the Pahls, including McDonald's apple slices and treats for the reindeer.

"I said there were carrots at (our) house," he said. "Just get a big ladder for me, I can go right up and put the carrots on our roof."

The Pahl family, of Mazeppa, hadn't expected to be able to visit Santa in 2020. But mom Jordan Pahl said there were upsides to the unusual setup.

"I almost feel like it's more personable, you're not as rushed," she said. "The last years, there hasn't been much of a chance to talk to him — you have the line behind you."

ABC & Toy Zone owner Rene Nordhus said in years past, the shop's Santa has visited with up to 30 families in any given hour.

This year, he's seeing four an hour in-person.

To avoid a line, families enter the store one at a time, visit with Santa, pose for photos, then exit through the shop. Staff members clean the area before the next group enters.

They're on a tight-schedule — Santa's in-person visits are booked solid.

Nordhus said the in-person visits' popularity outweighed the virtual ones 10 times — the shop made the visits live on their website at 6 a.m. Nov. 14, and by 7 a.m., the website had crashed.

She spent three straight days scheduling visits over the phone. Evenings and weekends sold out quickly, and the last of the "naptime slots" sold out at the end of November.



Photos by Traci Westcott / twestcott@postbulletin.com

Santa pokes at the Plexiglas barrier while he awaits scheduled visits from families on Saturday, Dec. 5, at ABC & Toy Zone in Northwest Rochester.

"It's the same families that have seen him for many, many years," she said.

As always, Santa reminds children to go to bed early and listen for jingle bells on their roofs — that's the sign to hurry to bed. He also wished them a "safe, happy and healthy" Christmas.

Although some children have been wary of the clear barrier, Nordhus said they've bounced back from the surprise quickly — unlike some of their parents.

"Some of the moms, I think they're having a harder time adjusting," she said. "They've seen him for 12 years or 15 years, whatever the case may be, and they just want to hug him."

See SANTA PAGE C3



Brantley Pahl, 4, of Mazeppa, tells Santa what he wants for Christmas during a visit Saturday, Dec. 5, at ABC & Toy Zone in Northwest Rochester.



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Dan Price, who plays George Bailey, and Rene Stiller, who plays Mary Hatch, perform while recording the Rochester Civic Theatre Company's production of "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play," directed by Tony Opelt, on Dec. 4 in Rochester.

## Tune in for area holiday productions

BY JOHN MOLSEED  
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Theater is going virtual to wrap up 2020, which means the best seat in the house is wherever the best seat is in your house.

Area theaters are turning to the oldest form of broadcasting to continue delivering performances to audiences. Rochester Civic Theatre, Commonweal Theatre and La Crosse Community Theatre are all presenting staged radio play performances this holiday season.

The Civic is presenting prerecorded productions of "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play," Dec. 18, 19 and 20.

A grant from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act gave the Civic funds to hire Northern Sun Productions to record and produce the show for streaming.

The staged radio play allows actors to see each other and play off their performances, but also keep a safe distance recommended by health officials.

Commonweal will also stream a prerecorded staged radio performance of an original holiday radio play, "A Driftless Christmas." That will be available on the Commonweal website through Jan. 4.

La Crosse Community Theatre is presenting a recorded staged performance of the radio broadcast version of "Miracle on 34th Street." That production will be available beginning Dec. 19.

See THEATER PAGE C3

## Conservation involves herd work

3 bison cows temporarily joined the herd at Zollman Zoo

Some guest grazers are gracing Zollman Zoo.

Three bison cows from Minneopa State Park in Mankato arrived in November as part of a program to increase the population of the animals in the state.

This year, Zollman Zoo joined the Minnesota Bison Conservation Herd. The Olmsted County zoo, in Byron, is the fourth organization to join the herd, which has about 130 head of bison throughout the state.

Zollman Zoo has had bison since the mid-1980s. However, the zoo had to wait for recent genetic test results to join Blue Mounds State Park Luverne, Minneopa State Park and the Minnesota Zoo in Apple Valley as part of the statewide herd initiative.

While only up to five or six of those bison will ever live at Zollman Zoo at any given time, the zoo's role in conserving and growing the state's bison population will still help create genetic diversity within the conservation herd.

Two female bison from Zollman were moved to the Minnesota Zoo to breed with bison there. One resident cow and the three females on loan to Zollman will have a chance to breed with the zoo's resident bull.

"Having four here at the park doesn't seem like it would be a lot," said Jaide Ryks, Zollman Zoo naturalist. "If you think of it like your family tree, you're going to get a lot of offspring — four different family lines — from those four bison alone."

The genetic testing of the Zollman bison found no indications that the bison had cross-bred with cattle. That makes them good candidates to help grow the state conservation



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John Molseed

herd. Genetic tests also show the state conservation herd doesn't have traces of cattle DNA, according to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

The long-term goal, set by the DNR and the Minnesota Zoological Garden, is to grow the state herd to 500 bison so that the population here can be sustained.

The DNR and the Minnesota Zoological Garden are coordinating the conservation herd partnership.

An estimated 50 million American plains bison used to roam the Upper Midwest before hunting dwindled their numbers down to fewer than 1,000. Ryks said she's excited to be part of an effort to thoughtfully increase the number of bison.

"We're not just a zoo that keeps animals in cages," she said.

Most of the zoo animals are rehabilitated animals that wouldn't survive in the wild, she added. Once at the zoo, animals there usually play a role in conservation and education efforts.

The female bison are adjusting to their new temporary surroundings, Ryks said.

Initially used to grazing as their sole source of food and wary of zoo staff, they've adjusted to their supplemental feed.

See HERD PAGE C3