

Miss Katie's Kids Korner

Tour of Duty

by Katie Taylor

Back in the late 1980s, I had a tour of duty with the Special Productions department at Macy's Herald Square as the manager of Santaland. Santaland officially opens on Black Friday (the day after Thanksgiving), but my basic training started a month earlier in October with a trip to Jupiter, Florida, for a store opening. It was there that I found out how hard those cute balloons are to handle.

At store openings, the responsibility of balloon handling usually went to the local high school with the football team manning the large balloon (Spiderman) and pep club members on the Stars. Those stars look tiny on TV, but there is a reason for the 125-pound weight requirement for all balloon handlers. Even in her tasseled white boots, Missy couldn't have topped 115 pounds. I heard her screams and came rushing over to grab the string just as she was about to achieve lift off. On a windy day, those balloons are rough!

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade is totally run by Macy's employees. People from the buying line to the selling floor volunteer their time and sleep to be Band, Balloon, or Clown Captains, and Celebrity Escorts. As part of my Santaland responsibilities, I assisted my boss in his parade duties. Mack was in charge of overseeing operations at "Base." Parade Captains were outfitted with walkie-talkies that could talk to Base but not to Central, the NBC booth. Base would then relay important information to Central. Like the weight requirement for balloon handlers, there was a reason everyone on the route did not have access to NBC.

Walkie-talkies are equipped with two buttons: Talk & Listen. Simple. But, in the hands of an over-excited asst. domestics buyer... challenging.

"Parade (crackle)... Mary... (Silence)... Come in Base. Over."

"This is base. Mary, push the talk button when you talk. Over."

"(Parade sounds)... the Spiderman balloon hit... (Silence)... Over."

"You're doing great. What happened to Spidey? Over."

"(Marching band)... Arm... (Crowds cheering)... Over."

"Where are you? Over."

"(Parade sounds)... 65th and (Silence)... Over."

"Good job, Mary. Over."

Having been up for 48 hours, the majority of the Special Productions department either took the day off or came in late on the Friday. However, Santas, the elves, the other managers, Mack and I were at the store Black Friday at 6:30 AM preparing for the opening day of Santaland.

There were four other Santaland managers who were responsible for the 126 elves, but the hiring of the "Santas" and keeping them in line was my job. This was not as easy as it might seem. Unlike the middle-aged, out-of-shape portrayal in storybooks, my "Santa" needed to have the strength of an Olympic athlete, combined with the intelligence of a college graduate and the charm of a used-car salesman. But most of all, Santa needed to possess a temperament which would enable him to sit in a cramped room for eight hours in a hot suit and scratchy beard and smile for a picture with a screaming child on his lap. In other words, "Santa" needed to be an out-of-work actor.

110 people applied for the job. There were a couple of women – sorry, no – and one "older" gentleman who thought he would make the perfect "Santa" since he already had the white beard. After a week of interviews, I was asked out on a couple of dates, and hired 26 Santas.

Santaland is a gigantic line dressed up to look like a winter wonderland of trains chugging merrily around snow-capped mountains, skating penguins, and sparkling Christmas trees. Dim lighting enhances the enchantment of the scenes as well as disguises the fact that parents and their overdressed children have been waiting for up to 2 hours for their chance to reach "The Man." On any given shift, 26 elves would be on hand for crowd control and to assist the six Santas in their houses. During the week, the traffic was light and the regular managers (who did know how to use the walkie-talkies) could easily herd school groups and families through the maze. The weekends were a different story. By the time the Saturday before Christmas arrived, the Santas, elves, managers, Mack and I were ready. We had been training for weeks for this Saturday and the anticipation was palpable!

It started slowly, but by 1 PM, Mack and I were posted at the top of the seldom used escalator, preventing certain lawsuits by shouting "Keep to

the left and keep moving!" as hundreds swarmed up the chute. Santas clocked their best visit time to less than two minutes per family; elves smiled, took pictures and lifted children on and off Santa's lap like huge pistons running a tremendous machine. Managers didn't need walkie-talkies, all emphasis and concentration focused on the moment and that moment was NOW! Over 3,000 people came through Santaland during an 8-hour shift that Saturday. Do the math: that's 3,000 divided by 6 = 500 per Santa in 8 hours which is between 62-63 people an hour! Wow! We were good!

After that day, things slowed down a bit and Santa left Macy's at store closing December 24th to deliver his toys to good girls and boys. My job as the Santaland manager had a definite beginning, middle, and end and one year was enough. Like the army, Macy's has many divisions, so in January, I left the Special Productions department and moved to Advertising. But, I will always remember Santaland as my favorite post. ✨

*Katie Taylor is now posted at the Christ Lutheran Church where she is currently taking applications for her **Kindermusik** classes. For more information call 845-647-7291 or email: kyville@ulster.net*

Post New Year's Night

1/8/05

Christian Concert, Play "N" Movie

Presented by
**Caribbean &
American Gospel
Music Ministry &
Christ Ministries
Baptist Church**

Norbury Hall

73 Center St., Ellenville

Saturday Jan. 8th

7 p.m. – 11 p.m.

**Admission – Adults: \$12;
7-18: \$8; under 7: FREE!**

For info. 845-551-6413

*If Heavy snowing –
reschedule date will be 4/9/05*