

# Milford man creates a Santa's workshop to take on the road to raise funds for nonprofits



Rick George, aka Santa's helper, is building a traveling Christmas house that will allow non-profits to raise money by making the house the center of their fundraiser. Of course, Santa will be present for those events and waiting to speak with children. Photo Contributed by Bill Hoagland

By Pam McLoughlin, *New Haven Register*

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MILFORD >> Santa will keep his sleigh and nine reindeer for Christmas Eve transportation, but now he has a brand new set of wheels that will work another kind of magic by raising money for nonprofits.

Rick George, who calls himself an “ambassador” to Santa — although some believe he’s actually more than that — has combined his love of building, love of Santa and love of nonprofits to build a 24-by-8 foot mobile Santa’s workshop that is 12.5 feet high.

The red and green structure, a tiny house, has an arched roof, oak floor, knotty pine walls, counters, a mini-fridge, a television that will play only Christmas movies and of course, an area for Santa to sit and talk to children.

“Having been involved in nonprofits my whole life, it’s another way people can come in, not even know it’s nonprofit and walk away with a good feeling or a picture for a Christmas card,” George said. “I hope it’s as successful as I think it would be.”



Rick George, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Santa Claus (especially when in his red suit and black boots) has spent months and a lot of money building this Santa's workshop on wheels so that Santa can make appearances at non-profit fundraisers. Photo Contributed by Bill Hoagland.

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The way George has it planned, he'll haul the workshop to a spot of choice for the nonprofit and that group can create their own holiday event around it — decorations, food, hot chocolate, games or wherever their imagination takes them.

"I'm hoping they turn it into a carnival atmosphere. They can do as much or as little as they want," George said.

The workshop, complete with photo area, would be used for pictures with Santa and the

nonprofit would keep the proceeds, as well as the money from any outside the house sales or activities. In other words, George would bring the main attraction for free and they would build around it.

George, who bears such an uncanny resemblance to the jolly old elf that kids stop him year round to give him Christmas lists, will be Santa. His new workshop has a pop-out section — a photo studio of sorts — where Santa will sit in front of a holiday backdrop.

On another wall will be a bench with an outdoor backdrop for kids who need to warm up to Santa with their parents next to them.

There will be popcorn-popping and movies such as "It's a Wonderful Life," streaming on the television. And George hopes the knotty pine walls will spark nostalgia, even conversation, in adults because he figures that at some point, everyone had knotty pine paneling at home.

"I'm trying to bring people back to a kinder, gentler time," he said.

He wants it to be "that when you walk in here, you walk into a magical, mystical place."

Under his plan, George would set up shop for a different group each weekend, but wouldn't accept any fee. So it would all be profit for a good cause.

George currently is such a hot Santa that he's booked every weekend between Thanksgiving and Dec. 24, appearing mostly at community events. The mobile workshop made its debut Friday at Milford's downtown Lamplight Stroll on the grounds of First United Church of Christ Congregational, 34 West Main St. and on another day at a Milford Historical Society event. The full-time, nonprofit schedule will begin next year.

George isn't ruling out using the house on wheels for other holidays and events for the purpose of fundraising.

George, a retired city animal control officer, greeter at a local elementary school and a veteran remodeler who has long rented a garage for his ongoing projects, considers the tiny house/ Santa's workshop dear to his heart. Even the garage lot cats that George feeds outside the trailer have names such as Comet and Jingle Bells.

George has had some help from friends, but has invested many man hours into the creation and spent countless dollars — he's afraid to add it up, he said. He's been collecting materials for years, buying windows on Ebay, wood paneling at a yard sale and began his dream project last summer, working through the heat and humidity. He built on an 18-foot car trailer and will haul it with his truck.

George laid the floor last weekend and put on the finishing touches this week. A friend, Bill Hoagland, created website for George called [www.EverythingSanta.org](http://www.EverythingSanta.org).

George is prepared to foot the bill for the project himself, but he will accept donations through his website if anyone wants to contribute. There are some big ticket items he can't produce as easily — such as the right generator.

Orange First Selectman Jim Zeoli said last year that he spotted George's special Santa qualities long ago when he first met him through animal control channels. When George walked in with his white beard and wire-rimmed glasses, Zeoli told him, "You'd make a good Santa Claus."

Zeoli told the Register last year that as he got to know George more as a "fair and honest" person and as the beard got longer, the Santa Claus resemblance became uncanny.

"If you look into his eyes, I swear to God he has that twinkle. His eyes make him look like Old St. Nick," Zeoli has said. "Everyone has a calling in life and this is his calling,"

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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