

For 'Singing Santa Claus', it's all about making memories

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Correspondent

KEMPSVILLE

The name Tom Long is synonymous with the name Santa Claus, at least at The Founders Inn.

For the past 10 years, Long has been the jolly old man in the red suit at the inn. This is the 20th year that the Founders Illumination has ushered in the start of the holiday season in Hampton Roads.

The tradition kicks off at noon Sunday and runs until 8 p.m. At 6 p.m., the grounds transform into a magical winter wonderland when thousands of white lights begin a sparkle that lasts throughout the holiday season.

Free and open to the public, the event has always been a gift to the community, said Jean Vinson, public relations coordinator for The Founders Inn and Spa, which is now under the management of West Paces Hotel Group.

"The kids just love it; they get stars in their eyes," said Vinson, adding that organizers expect about 2,000 people to attend.

going?

What Founders Illumination

When noon to 8 p.m. Sunday

Where The Founders Inn and Spa, 5641 Indian River Road

Cost All events (except for the buffet in the Swan Terrace Restaurant) are free and open to the public.

Info Call 366-5700 or visit www.FoundersInn.com for more details.

Each year, attendees look up in awe at the 35-foot Christmas tree in the atrium while musical groups such as St. Gregory the Great Catholic School Children's Choir, Young Musician's Middle School, Providence Presbyterian Church Hand Bell Choir, Norfolk Christian Windsong and more perform beneath it.

The activities, inside and out, are for young and old. They include: a marionette show by Spectrum Puppets, reading of the Christmas story by Pat Robertson, face painting, Singing Santa

Claus, Philippine Cultural Dancers, Rhythm of Ireland Dancers and carriage rides.

This year, three new acts join the mix of entertainment: a yo-yo artist, Krendl the Magician and toy soldier stilt walkers.

But, the one familiar face everyone comes to see and talk with, of course, is Santa Claus.

Long, 47, of Chesapeake, has played the role since he was in his early 20s, when he first applied at a mall in Ohio.

"The rest, they say, is history," Long said. When it comes to "playing" Santa, Long, who is officially known as the Singing Santa Claus, takes the role quite seriously.

He not only takes a six-week unpaid leave of absence from his job as general manager of Captain George's Seafood Restaurant in Colonial Williamsburg, he also moves into a room at The Founders Inn during that time.

"For years I would load up my gear, sneak out of the house, and sneak back in so my children wouldn't see me," said Long, who is the father of twin 12-year-old

boys, Ben and Noah, and of 17-year-old daughter, Matte.

With more than an hour needed to get dressed and prepare for his role, Long said it's much easier operating out of a room. Fortunately, his wife, Wendee, is very understanding and supportive.

"I want to create memories and traditions for people," Long said. "You might remember your first doll or bike, but it is those memories with Santa that build memories for a lifetime."

As for how much longer Long plans to play the role, he said he'll do it until he can't physically do it anymore.

"It's been a remarkable journey and it's beyond a job," Long said. "I hope one, if not both, of my sons will follow in my footsteps one day."

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Tom Long, 47, has played Santa since his early 20s, when he first applied at a mall in Ohio. He hopes his sons will someday carry on the tradition.

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The garden at The Founders Inn and Spa will be illuminated with thousands of light at 6 p.m. Sunday. They remain on until after New Year's Day.