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Santa, entourage fly in for Christmas Eve

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ARLINGTON - Santa Claus traded in his sleigh Christmas Eve for a shiny red helicopter, loaded it with a few friends, zipped over to a central Arlington store and spread some cheer.

A crowd of about 400, nearly all of them people who have received assistance from Mission Arlington, was on hand at the Venture store on Randol Mill Road for the event - the end of seasonlong effort by a nonprofit Mid-Cities group called Santa U.S.A.

Among those waiting for a handshake was 2-year-old Destiny Hartfield, who seemed more impressed with one of Kriss Kingle's buddies, the character she called "bunny" while staring with wide-eyed wonder.

"That's Frosty," corrected her big brother, Daryn Hartfield, 10.

"Frosty's right there," Destiny agreed as she pointed at him. "BIG Frosty!"

Santa U.S.A. is an organization with about 1,500 volunteers dedicated to spreading joy among people who might not have it otherwise. Yesterday's event was sponsored by the Great Southwest Association of Life Underwriters, an association of insurance agents.

Most of the attendees, waiting in the store's parking lot, had to turn their backs as Santa's helicopter landed, whipping the wind and several pieces of trash in their direction.

Many of the 250 children sought refuge from the gale in the arms, chests, and legs of their parents but quickly turned to greet Santa, Mrs. Claus, Frosty, Rudolph and several elves.

The helicopter crew members shook hands and passed out peppermints as they made their way around a yellow rope barrier.

Santa, who sometimes goes by the name David Moon, has been almost as busy as the real Santa, sometimes visiting as many as 25 nursing homes, schools, hospitals and children's homes via helicopter per day.

Moon, who founded Santa U.S.A., has appeared as the Bearded One for 19 years.

"We do it out of a love for people and the kids, that's the name of the game," said Moon, a 55-year-old Bedford resident and insurance agent.

As the crew was preparing to leave, 2-year-old Darrin Drake darted past the yellow rope separating him from the red helicopter and ran toward Rudolph.

After staring up at the tall figure, seemingly perplexed that he got so far without being stopped, Darrin held up his arms.

A nearby volunteer laughed.

"He wanted to give Rudolph a hug," she said.

Frosty spent much of his time striking muscle-man poses. He and Rudolph were a big hit.

"They were dancing the macarena," said 5-year-old Maria Rojas of Arlington, who then giggled that they probably learned the popular dance at the North Pole.

Maria's father, Frank Rojas Jr., said the event was extra special for his family, who did not have Christmas last year because a 6-year-old nephew and uncle died in a car crash on Christmas Eve.

"We've got to have that spirit back," he said. "This was really nice for the kids."

PHOTO(S): Darrell Byers

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