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'Knucklehead Santa' and 'Chaz' Deliver More Than Gifts

By Diane Claytor



Alan Smith (Chaz, the elf), upper left, smiles with fellow elves and "Knucklehead Santa," Alex Cox. Photos provided

From January through November, Lafayette's Alex Cox and Orinda's Alan Smith are like most other suburban husbands and fathers: they go to work every morning, attend sporting events, vacation with their families and help their kids with homework. But come December, Cox, a small business owner, and Smith, a corporate attorney, take on their alter-egos, becoming their own version of Santa Claus (Cox) and his trusty elf, Chaz (Smith).

Best friends since their high school days in Oakland, the two, who are equally passionate and often finish each other's sentences, describe themselves as fun-loving and goofy. And it's that silliness that brought them to co-found OakLuv, an organization created to bring joy and happiness to underprivileged families in East Oakland.

Smith's 1963 classic convertible was the unintended impetus when, six years ago, the two boys-at-heart decided to dress up as Santa and his elf and drive around, blaring holiday music. The idea grew; they bought candy canes and small toys to hand out. "Then it was, OK, where should we go to bring smiles to a lot of people?" Cox said.

Having grown up in East Oakland, Cox suggested going to his old neighborhood. They pulled up to his childhood home on 38th Avenue and "people just started coming out of their houses," Smith continued. "We're dressed as Santa and his elf, talking to the people that now live in Alex's former house, and more and more kids start coming around. All of a sudden, we're handing out toys and candy to all these kids." Finishing the story, Cox explained that "it was quite silly and over the top. We weren't actually trying to be Santa or an elf, we were just being ourselves with our own little twist."

When they first started, both men admit, it really wasn't to be altruistic. "I don't think we were necessarily trying to be super nice," Smith said. "It was more lets go have some fun and hand things out. But then, something changed. When we were handing out toys, looking at all the kids' and parents' faces ... they were so happy and it was so touching. And it was so easy to do. So the next year we stepped it up." And they've "stepped it up" every year since.

Four years ago, OakLuv adopted two classes at an East Oakland elementary school. With the assistance of friends who annually host a party and raise money to benefit OakLuv, 50 kindergarteners received a jacket and toys from Knucklehead Santa (as Cox refers to himself), Chaz and his team of elves. "Santa just shows up, unannounced," Cox said. "The kids' jaws drop. The first year we did this, the teacher said, with tears in her eyes, 'I didn't think anyone cared about us.' There are so many touching moments," Cox continued.

Last year, Smith noted, they expanded again, providing gifts for women and children living in a shelter for domestic abuse victims. This year, they've added a second domestic abuse shelter as well as a preschool for children suffering from personal trauma. "We receive lists of what these women and children need and want and farm them out to our ever-growing network of friends and family who are eager to help," Smith said.

OakLuv has joined forces with the Oakland Fire Department's Random Acts of Kindness group, helping to fulfill wishes expressed in letters kids write to the firefighters. With sincere emotion, Cox told of one letter received from a boy living in a shelter. "He said he didn't want anything for

Christmas but he hoped his two younger brothers would get presents. Santa, Chaz and our elves knocked on the shelter door, asked to see this young man and showered him, his brothers and other shelter residents, with gifts."

The house on 38th Avenue is still the site of OakLuv's biggest party. The family puts out signs in the neighborhood announcing Santa's arrival. Last year, more than 400 gifts were distributed and, Smith exclaimed, "there was a line of kids winding around a city block." There was a pinata and a mariachi band. This year they're hoping to have a fire truck in addition to their fleet of classic convertibles driving Santa and his elves around.

"This whole thing has taken on a life of its own, and it's very humbling," Cox said. Smith added that "seeing the joy on the faces of kids and parents is just incredibly powerful and moving." They both agreed that, "little ol' Alan and Alex" stumbled onto something bigger than they ever could have imagined and both have been dramatically changed.

To learn how you can help bring happiness to underprivileged families, go to www.oakluv.org.



"Knucklehead Santa" arrives in Oakland.



A surprise visit at an Oakland elementary school.



"Knucklehead Santa" shares a hug.

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