Why I . . . play Santa Claus

Consultant emergency physician Robert Taylor tells Adrian O’Dowd that playing the part of Santa at Christmas provides a welcome break from work and raises money for charity

Adrian O’Dowd

“For me, being Santa is about seeing the smiles on children’s faces and the faces of their parents. It’s fantastic,” says Robert Taylor, consultant emergency physician at the Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust.

“It’s important to make time for this. I do it on my weekends when I’m not down to do any clinical work. From a wellbeing point of view, it’s important to put aside time for yourself. You can add it to your diary so it makes it as important and relevant as other commitments,” he says.

“In addition, sometimes it’s quite good fun to do something a bit silly and ridiculous. For me, it’s a nice way of spending a day in the run up to Christmas, and I’ll be doing it again this year. I’ve been trying to encourage my other colleagues to do it as well.”

He adds, “As someone who now has teenage kids for whom the magic of Christmas has somewhat worn off, it takes you back to when it was a magical thing for the children.”

Since 2017—apart from last year’s enforced break because of pandemic restrictions—Taylor has, along with others, played Santa at a local garden centre. By doing so he raises money for the Front Line Emergency Equipment Trust (FLEET), a charity for which he is a trustee and vice chairperson. FLEET was set up by Cornish ambulance staff in 1990 as a way of equipping ambulances with standardised and up to date equipment.

The charity has so far raised more than £1m, and the money has been used to provide 176 defibrillators in locations across Cornwall, including emergency ambulances, search and rescue helicopters, fire engines, coastguard teams, air ambulances, and police vehicles.

Taylor, who also teaches students at the University of Exeter medical school, says, “The recent statistics show there were almost 200 activations of our defibrillators and we’ve had six people who have been defibrillated leave hospital—so we’ve saved at least six lives.”

Part of the money raised has come from an agreement between the charity and the Trelawney Garden Centre. The garden centre runs a Santa’s Grotto every Christmas time and donates around £3000 per year to FLEET on the basis that the charity supplies them with a team of volunteer Santas.

“Throughout December, we are the Santa Clauses for the centre,” explains Taylor. “Clearly, we’re not the real Santa because he’s busy elsewhere. Members and friends of the charity put themselves forward to do a half or a whole day dressed as Santa per week.

To see the children coming through is a really fun, rewarding thing to do.”

Taylor adds, “Christmas means different things to different people and there’s no doubt that, whether you’re religious or not, it’s an important time that brings friends and families together.”

Despite the time of year being notoriously busy, Taylor says fitting in this “seasonal” work is achievable. The benefits of taking part are clear, he argues. “It’s a good way to destress from the day job. Being part of a charity is great, and it’s nice to do things outside of work and put something back into the community,” he says. “To be Santa for a day means you can’t think of too many other things and you’re concentrating on the child in front of you, asking what they want for Christmas, and their parents’ happiness. You come away afterwards feeling rewarded and happy.

How to make the change

- Get involved in charity work that is helpful to others and rewarding in itself
- Ask local charities if they do anything in the run-up to Christmas
- Organise your diary carefully. Make this kind of voluntary role as important as other commitments, with properly allotted time

1 FLEET. https://fleet.org.uk/index.html