What It's Like to Be a Black Santa

Every December, 65-year-old Ron Zeno goes on a diet. He wants to lose five pounds so he can fit into his red Santa suit comfortably.

"Other Santas stuff pillows in the suit, but not me," he jokes.

Zeno is a veteran in this St. Nicholas business. For the past 20 years, he's served as the resident Santa at Children's Fairyland,an amusement park in Oakland, California. And, as you might imagine, he's a natural.

A week before Christmas, Zeno's holiday grotto, which smells of holiday spices and has two child-sized angels — one black, one white — carved on the entrance door, is alive with kids eager to see their favorite red-suited guy. Two blond kids throw their arms around him and whisper they'd like a truck this year. A serious five-year-old girl with bowl-cut bangs whispers what she wants.

"A big dolly?" he asks.

"A big D-O-G-G-Y," she clarifies.

But Zeno isn't a standard Santa — at least, according to the more typical Coke bottle version of Santa Claus. He's African-American, and part of a movement, led partly by former NBA star Baron Davis, to promote Santas who are just as diverse as America. "I never saw Black

Santa growing up," says Davis. "I would have loved to. It would have given [me] a positive image of Santa."

The 37-year-old Davis, who has two kids, started the Black Santa Company in November with the goal of making them more commonplace, not just an exception. His company sells seasonally themed products, and promotes storytelling and diverse characters to combat the negative references Davis says he saw as a child and teenager (i.e. the black Santa criminal in movies like *Friday After Next*).

"That's not what I wanted for my kids," he says.

His efforts come in the same year that Minnesota's Mall of America introduced Larry Jefferson, a retired U.S. military veteran, as its first black Santa. That move, unfortunately, was met with immediate harsh backlash online. Commenters flooded news articles with angry comments, describing Jefferson as an "atrocity" and far worse.

But Zeno, whose home base of Oakland is likely more diverse than the Mall of America's Minnesota suburb, says that kids only bring up his race because they're curious. "Once a kid said to me, 'You're black, Santa. You're different,'" he recalls. "It wasn't negative — more questioning. I told him, 'Santa's magical and can look however he wants.'"

Zeno sees questions like this as a chance to educate kids and believes they are good learning experiences. "Black Santas need to be role models for kids," he says. "Santa is a way to combat racism."

The movement for more diverse Santas is still, mostly, in its infancy. Less than 3% of all professional Santas in the U.S. are black, according to Tim Connaghan, who runs the RealSantas Booking Agency out of his Los Angeles home. There's no clear reason why there are so few black Santas. It could be that the overall pool of aspiring Santas is small and self-limiting. In most cases, the men who play Santa spend their own money on suits and accessories and attend expensive training lessons. They also need to be OK working seasonal hours for potentially low pay and dealing with children all day, which, let's be honest, isn't for everyone.

But for black Santas in particular, there's a history of discrimination. In 1969, according to the BBC, a civil rights leader called Santa "one of the established symbols of racism" after Shillito's, a department store in Cincinnati, refused to hire a black Santa. Fast forward 56 years, and many people were angry about the Mall of America's opposite approach.

This negativity around Santas of color is partly what inspired Davis to launch his Black Santa Company. "As a parent, you worry about kids' safety and the world they're living in," he says. "[My] kids are mixed — that's the reason for conversation about black Santa."

His company's mascot is a cartoon Claus, with a wide smile and hip glasses. The company's products include ugly Christmas sweaters, T-shirts printed with "giving has no season," tree ornaments and "Bless Me" wrapping paper. A larger-than-life mascot often accompanies Davis to Black Santa promotional events.

"It builds hope for kids, to see a Santa that looks like them," Davis says. "We feel like the Santa we're creating will be the company that connects to people and this generation." Future iterations will find Mrs. Claus items around Valentine's Day, and a Latino character and coloring book are scheduled for Latino Heritage Month in September.

There have also been other initiatives for more diverse Santas. "Pancho Claus" is a Latino version of Santa that is popular in Texas and got its start from a 1950s song by Lalo Guerrero. The song says Pancho is "Santa's cousin from south of the border." Houston's famed Pancho Claus is Richard Reyes, who has donned a snazzy black-and-red suit to spread holiday cheer for decades; in November 2015, he fought to be included on the TV broadcast of Houston's Thanksgiving parade. Last year, Apple expanded its Santa emojis to include Clauses of all races, including Asian, Latino and African-American.

This is very different than the Christmases 30-year-old Thomas Love had as a child. He'd rarely seen a black Santa except occasionally at elementary school, and the idea of black Santa becoming mainstream is new to him. Based in Atlanta, Love is new to the Santa business, and this is his second year in the red suit. By day he works in a marketing agency, but on weekends he gets sent to Santa gigs across the state as one of Atlanta Black Santa's three Saint Nicks.

"When kids are a certain age they don't pay attention to the whole color thing. They just see Santa and get excited," Love says. "The parents are more appreciative of an ethnic Santa. They come up to me and tell me how happy they are that their kids can experience a Santa that looks like them."

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Love credits his consistently warm reception to the fact that he enters environments where people want a black Santa. When people hire through Atlanta Black Santa, they know what they're getting.

"I thought the [Mall of America] incident was sad and disheartening," he says. He believes that backlash speaks to the current climate in America and has noticed more parents are talking politics to him this year, but he tries to steer them away from that.

"Christmas is about religion, community and family," he says.

These Santas say that, for kids, race has next to nothing to do with their experience. Despite the color of his skin, kids either love Santa or, if they're too young, cry hysterically and make for hilarious photo ops. But the men who work as Santas say that representation can mean a lot for future generations.

"Before [being Santa], I wouldn't have cared about what color Santa I took my [future] kids too," Love says. "But now I'd take them to a black Santa. Growing up you see so much white Santa everywhere and knowing things aren't one type of way is important."