

Generous 'Wheelchair Santa' Brings Cheer All Year

Many Christian families leave Santa Claus out of Christmas to help their kids focus on the birth of Jesus. But 68-year-old Ed Butchart, who already looks the part with his white hair and beard, dons a red suit and assumes the role of Santa to tell children about the God who loved the world so much He sent His Son.

"My goal is to let kids feel the love of Christ through me," he told Charisma.

Founder of an Atlanta-area ministry called Friends of Disabled Adults and Children, Butchart has played Santa at Stone Mountain Park since 1991. He is undeterred when well-meaning Christians say he should not portray Santa.

When kids ask questions, Butchart answers in a way that steers the conversation toward Christ. For example, he will tell children that Santa can't watch them at all times, but Jesus can. He notes that the original Santa, St. Nicholas, was a Christian whose generosity became legendary.

Butchart is known for his generosity too. With support from his church, Mount Carmel Christian Church in Stone Mountain, Butchart has given away more than 10,000 refurbished wheelchairs to people in 62 nations, as well as \$40 million in donated medical supplies. Recently, the ministry sent an 18-wheeler full of supplies to Iraq.

Butchart began working with the disabled in 1986, after he befriended a young man with cerebral palsy. One of the first wheelchairs he gave away was to a young girl in Vietnam who lost both of her legs to a land mine. "We've spent virtually no money to [obtain] those supplies," said Butchart, who is sometimes called the "Wheelchair Santa." "It just comes from all over."

A book about Butchart's adventures playing Santa and ministering to the disabled, titled *The Red Suit Diaries*, is due out this month. Some of the proceeds will benefit the ministry, but Butchart said God has always supplied the ministry's needs. "Sometimes [financial help] would show up in 15 minutes after we prayed," he said. "The more we depended on Him, the more He came through."

Richard Daigle in Atlanta