

Real-Life Miracles

Five stories that show they can happen anywhere—in the snow, in the sand, even on the sidewalk

The Christmas Warrior

KENNETH MARYBOY BOUGHT HIMSELF a used Santa suit. He was tall and skinny, and his black hair stuck out from under his cap in sharp contrast with his cheap white cotton beard. No matter that he didn't look the part—he was fulfilling a vow he'd made the previous year.

Back then, just before Christmas 1978, Kenneth was a passenger in a car traveling down a lonely road in the Navajo Nation in Utah. The night was dark, the driver was an elderly woman, and she struck and killed an eight-year-old boy.

Seeing the agony of the boy's family, Kenneth made a promise. He would "do whatever it takes to make children happy at Christmastime."



Kenneth Maryboy at his 28th annual giveaway.

A year later, at age 18, he was living with his mother and younger brother on the reservation. They were barely making ends meet on his meager wages as a welder, but Kenneth bought the Santa suit and went around persuading people as poor as himself to give candy and fruit for families even more needy.

He strapped a cardboard reindeer to the front of his old red pickup, and just before midnight on a wind-bitten Christmas Eve, he went knocking on doors of dilapidated houses and trailers along the Utah Strip, the poorest section of the Navajo Nation. Many of the darkened homes didn't have electricity or plumbing.

Some families were afraid to open their doors so late at night. "It's a man! He has a big bag!" he heard a boy, holding up a lantern and watching from behind the curtains, tell his parents. Kenneth convinced them he was harmless with his echoing "ho ho ho!"

At every opened door, he handed out candy canes, oranges, mints. Many Navajo kids had never seen Santa Claus before, so his threadbare costume and store-bought beard didn't disappoint them. It touched Kenneth that they were excited by so little.

He kept it up year after year, gathering more "elves" to help him.

Kenneth is now 46 and commissioner for San Juan County. His solo Christmas Eve visits have grown into an annual Navajo feast with gifts of clothing, tools and toys for over 700 people. Kids who can't make it to the event because they're sick or lack

transportation get a personal visit from Kenneth or one of his elves.

"My grandfather taught me that you learn to be a man and a warrior by sharing and by keeping promises," he says.

CATHY FRENCH

Christmas in July

ERIKA ORLANDO SITS next to her fireplace, writing a Christmas card. Outside the living room window of her home in St. Louis, Missouri, snow is falling, soft flakes covering the world and her mind shifts back to a summer day and a beach as bright as snow.

ON A FAMILY VACATION in Santa Rosa, Florida, earlier this year, Erika and her brother were sitting on a strip of warm white sand, having a serious conversation about faith. Children were splashing in the waves and playing on the shore. Just then, they heard a woman screaming, "Rob is missing!" The woman's husband ran toward the sea and began scanning the waves. Erika asked him to describe the child, but he seemed in shock and only gestured with his hand at a height just above his knee. She turned to the mother and asked the same question. "He has curly blond hair," the mother said, "and he's wearing a bright orange shirt. He's afraid of the water."

Bystanders came running to the shore from all over. For some reason Erika found herself pulled in the opposite direction, toward a group of people sitting farther up the beach. "Have you seen a little boy in an orange shirt?" They shook their heads.