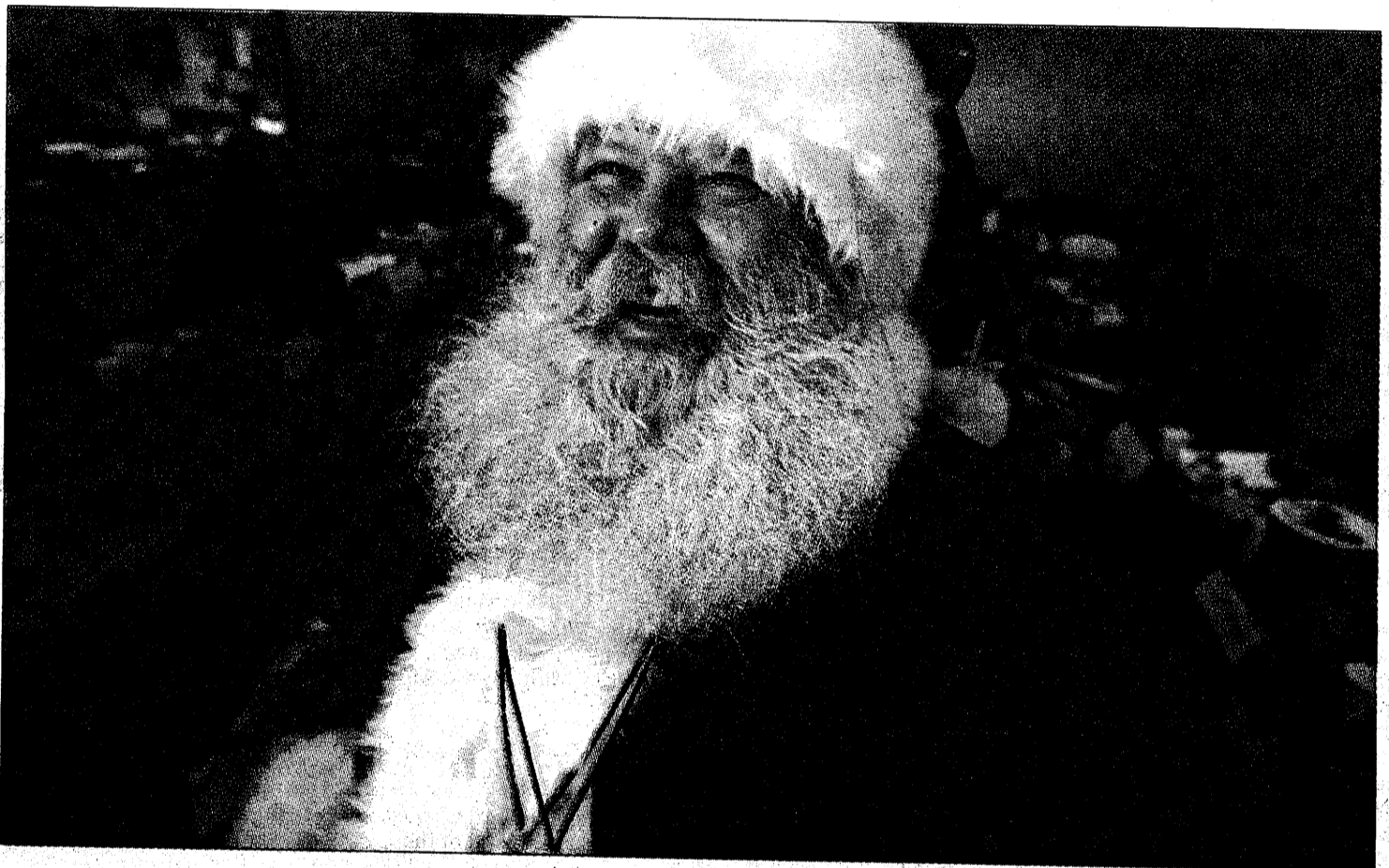


# 12

*Their efforts to help others set them apart, showing how they embody the spirit of the season.*

## Faces of Christmas



CHRISTIAN PARLEY/THE FRESNO BEE

Joe Neves is a Kings County supervisor who spends most of the month of December in a Santa Claus costume bringing joy to children.

## Joe Neves

The Neves family made a deal with Santa Claus three generations ago that Joe Neves still honors today.

For 11 months each year, the jolly and bearded Kings County supervisor from Stratford lets the jolly old elf from the North Pole run things at the toy shop.

But the day after Thanksgiving, the deal changes.

That's when Neves, like his father and grandfather before him, dons his own red suit and starts filling in for Santa Claus at schools, day care centers and assisted living homes throughout Kings County.

In December, according to Neves family lore, Santa needs a little help.

"It's a family tradition to pitch in and make some appearances each season," Neves said.

Or at least the tradition used to be just a few appearances. Last

Santa 80 times. Some years, the number is more than 200. This year, for the first time ever, Santa Neves has two visits planned on Christmas Day.

All the visits are free, though a few businesses or individuals have contributed over the years to pay for replacement Santa suits.

It's a tough schedule, but one the 49-year-old father of two said he has no plans to give up.

"It's just neat, and I've done it so long now that I'm seeing the children of parents I saw 20 years ago," Neves said. "For some of those families, I'm the only Santa they've ever seen."

Marina Martinez, owner of the Manitas de Amor child care center in Hanford, said that for the 80 children she cares for, Neves is Santa Claus.

"He looks like Santa and talks to the children like they think Santa sounds," Martinez said. "It's absolutely wonderful to see."

Kathy Neves, who serves as Mrs. Claus at several events each year, said that it's the children that have kept the tradition alive through 20 years and at least five Santa suits.

"He'll come home and immediately tell me what some boy or girl said to him that day," Kathy Neves said.

"Once, a little girl asked for a flashlight because she was afraid of the dark. Another child asked for a coat for her mother so she wouldn't be cold."

Joe Neves said the draw of being Santa's

### All 12 Faces

The Bee found these special people, who help exemplify the spirit of the season.

■ **Sue Bissell**, who brings her dog to visit hospital patients.

■ **Marketing class at Fresno State**, in which students must participate in service projects.

■ **Emily Crowder**, a Buchanan High School junior who has made and distributed hundreds of scarves for the needy.

■ **Nancy Cunha**, recognized by the National Fraternal Congress of America.

■ **The Glens**, foster parents.

■ **Diane Gonzalez**, who helped create Fresno Women of Excellence.

■ **Marina Leon**, a volunteer at Stratford School near Lemoore.

■ **John and Jennifer McDougal**, whose volunteer work has raised more than \$120,000 for Children's Hospital's heart center.

■ **Joe Neves**, a third-generation Santa — complete with a



# Luis Santana

**L**uis Santana prefers to donate education instead of toys to struggling low-income children in Fresno County.

Yearlong gifts like reading lessons and homework tutoring are key to removing Fresno County children from the cycle of poverty, Santana says.

Santana, executive director of Fresno Covenant Foundation, knows temporary help such as coats or blankets in the Christmas season brings relief, but it's not enough.

He knows this firsthand. Santana, who lives in Fresno, grew up in a poor household in Brazil. His father died when he was 4 years old, and his mother didn't know how to read and write.

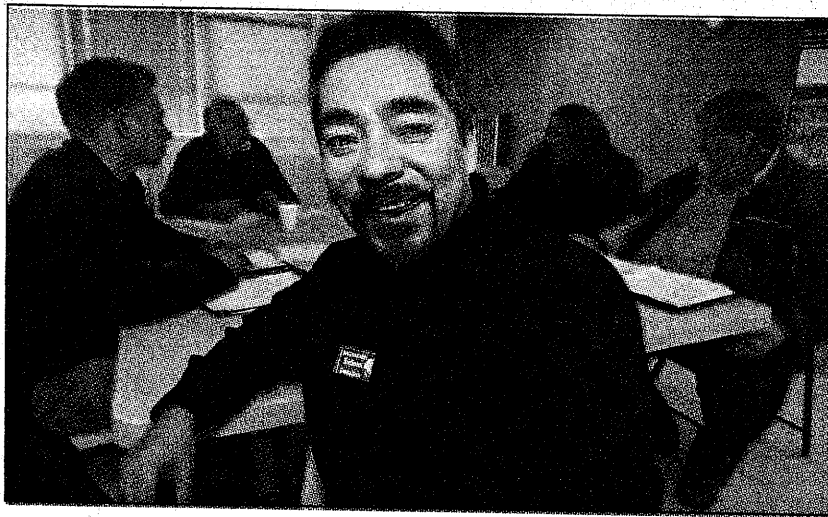
"You give them an opportunity and they thrive," said Santana of local children.

"Education is the tool."

Santana has used his life lessons to help thousands of children through the Fresno Covenant Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded seven years ago. The 50-year-old Santana is the primary founder of the foundation, a group that works with children who are academically at-risk.

More than 3,000 children have been enrolled in the program since 1999.

About 73% of the children in Fresno cannot read at a proficient level, according to the foundation. Since the establishment of the foundation, about 70% of the children enrolled in the tutoring program have improved in



Luis Santana, executive director of Fresno Covenant Foundation, says temporary help such as coats or blankets in the Christmas season brings relief, but it's not enough. Santana knows. He grew up poor in Brazil. His father died when he was 4, and his mother didn't know how to read or write.

**JOHN WALKER/  
THE FRESNO BEE**

reading by one grade level.

"They [tutors] really help children," said parent Reyna Martinez of her 9-year-old daughter.

"My daughter's reading level was very low. She was almost not going to make it to the next grade level. Now, she's reading at her grade level," Martinez said in Spanish.

Santana worked with street children in Brazil and was a hospital administrator there before arriving in the United States 15 years ago. He left Brazil to earn a master's degree in social work from California State University, Sacramento.

Santana then traveled to Colombia to work with street children and low-income families. He came to Fresno when he was asked in

March 1999 to head the Fresno Covenant Foundation. The group started as an after-school literacy and tutoring program but expanded its programs to take high school students on field trips to universities.

The programs have been recognized by Fresno Unified School District, the United Way in Fresno, the U.S. Department of Education and the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives.

Santana has brought more than \$3.5 million in grants to Fresno County, money that has gone directly to the foundation's programs.

In September, Santana was a winner of Union Bank's Salute to Small Business Award for the best nonprofit in 2006.

— **Vanessa Colón,  
The Fresno Bee**