



Santa Glen and the Snow Elves practice for the holidays. On Tuesday evenings you can find Santa Glen strolling as a troubadour in the Escondido Farmers Market on Grand Avenue. *Courtesy photo*

Santas want to instill healthier eating habits

By Helen Nielsen

REGION — What started two years ago in Carlsbad is now spreading throughout California.

It's the efforts of the "Real Santa's United to end Childhood Obesity," who have deployed Happy Health-promoting Santas into North County's farmers markets.

The group was started in 2013 by former Mall Santas concerned that the image and message of Santa had become one that both promotes and perpetuates unhealthy eating habits by passing out sweets and encourages shop-'til-you-drop unsustainable lifestyles.

The current epidemic of unhealthy children is the last thing America needs, as children in elementary schools are facing dramatic increases in metabolic diseases of which obesity is a key symptom.

These are serious illnesses, created by the added sugar and other chemicals found in fast and processed foods. And the "food courts" and our neighborhoods are loaded with places presenting these unhealthy offerings.

The results are obvious to everyone, say the Santas.

And while 80 percent of obese children and adults will get chronic metabolic diseases, 40 percent of those who appear "fit and healthy" will also get them.

Thus it is essential that everyone's eating habits be changed and kids eat real food.

The group's efforts have caught the attention of the doctors at the UCSF Medical School whose foundation, the Institute for Responsible Nutrition (IRN) has been tracking the Real Santa's United movement and their efforts to expand statewide.

"That's because these Santa's are making the culture shift that is essential for the future of a healthy America," said Wolfram Alderson, executive director of the IRN, which was founded by Dr. Robert Lustig, a neuroendocrinologist at the University of California, San Francisco.

"The major food and beverage corporations and

government policy makers have changed our food landscape from a cornucopia of healthy food to a garbage dump; one that fosters illness instead of wellness," said Alderson. "The importance of what these Santas are doing cannot be overstated.

"Sugar is the leading marker of processed foods, now added to 74 percent of the foods sold in the United States. The result is that \$1.4 trillion in healthcare costs are wasted due to preventable and chronic metabolic diseases fostered by the food industry."

The Real Santa's United take to the county farmers markets to help spread work of healthy eating habits.

The Santas all distribute cards containing "Santa's 3 Food Rules" — rules designed to guide the children and their parents away from the habit of eating unhealthy snacks, fast, processed foods, sodas, and the many other chemical and sugar-loaded and fried items which have become the staple of American fare.

Best of all, the Santas then send the children into the farmers market looking for "garden bites."

These are tastes of real food, fresh, raw or fermented, which are supplied by the farmer/vendors.

"It's like a treasure hunt for healthy food," said Santa Larry during the North San Diego Certified Farmers Market at the Sikes Adobe Historic Farmstead.

In the farmers markets, the children can taste the healthy alternatives, and the parents can purchase real foods, cheered on by a Santa who wants them to be: "Healthy, Happy and Fit for Life," the mantra of the Real Santa's United.

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