



BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Chris Casey and daughter Katie view a letter from Santa Claus sent via computer.

... and Receiving

Santa Hits the Information Highway

By Robert O'Harrow Jr.
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Just after dinner one night, Sarah Susalis and her family put on Christmas music, decorated their eight-foot plastic spruce and excitedly gathered around a glowing computer screen to send an electronic message to Santa Claus.

Within minutes, 7-year-old Sarah was connected to the North Pole. "I would like a Barbie Bath," she wrote, "a baby doll in a walker, a stroller, a baby bed, some books with book marks, 2 teddy bears, a Jurassic park poster, and a ring. I love you very much."

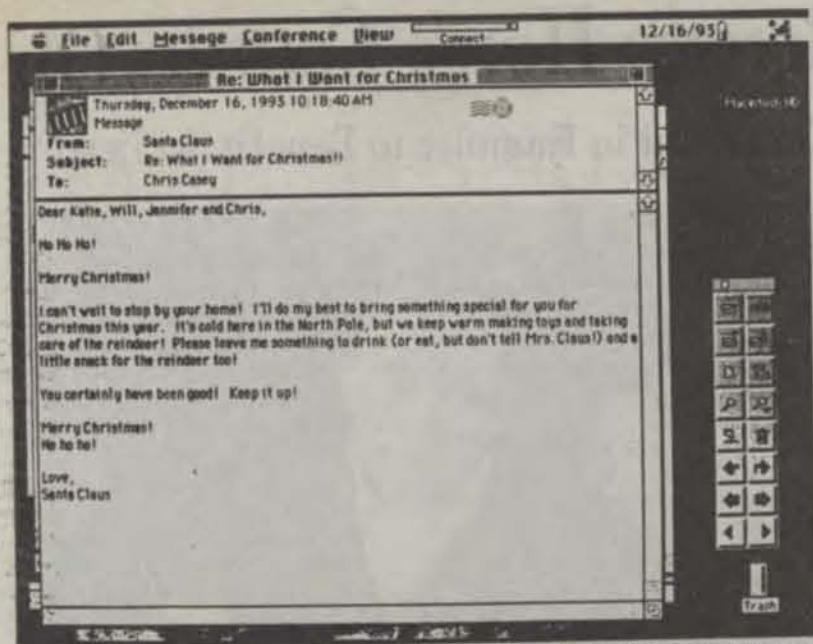
Santa's electronic reply flashed back, assuring Sarah, her sister and two brothers

that he would visit their Alexandria home on Christmas Eve—so long as they were tucked away in bed when he arrived. "Merry Christmas, Sarah!" he wrote. "I am looking forward to coming to your home this year! The toys you want sound great, and I'm happy to see that you are reading!"

So goes Christmas in the computer age. The Jolly One has taken to the information highways, joining millions of others communicating around the world on hundreds of linked networks.

Several nonprofit groups—including digitalNATION in Alexandria and the Internet Multicasting Service in the District—have created on-line addresses for

See MAIL, B4, Col. 1



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The response to the Casey family's electronic letter to Santa Claus appeared this way on Chris Casey's laptop computer screen.

Letters to Santa Claus Find Place in Cyberspace

MAIL, From B1

Santa and his workers who help the Big Guy reply to electronic letters from around the world. In just one week, the local groups responded to more than 4,000 letters from Sweden, Germany, Israel, Australia and the United States.

Kids aren't the only ones making appeals to Cyber-Santas. College students facing midterms are asking for good grades. U.S. soldiers in Somalia want one-way tickets to anywhere in the United States. A woman in Indiana asked Santa for a date on Christmas Eve.

"Hiya, Santa baby," began the proposition from Brook Stockman, 19. "Just wanted to let you know I've been a good girl this year."

Some parents are asking Santa to send special computer messages to cheer up unhappy children. "I would like Santa to send a letter to a special little boy named 'Duncan,'" one writer said. "His only wish for Christmas is to be able to lose enough weight that he will be accepted and liked by the other children."

Other writers are using the holiday linkup as a way to encourage their children on a computer. Chris Casey, a systems administrator for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), used his laptop to help his 3-year-old daughter, Katie, type an appeal for a doctor's bag, a puzzle and an "Aladdin" doll.

Before they signed off for the night, Katie received a message that she had made Santa's "good list" and could count on him to stop by her Prince William County home.

"In [Santa's] reply, he said, 'I've checked my list, and you and your mommy and daddy and brother are on the good list. But of course, I have only so much room in my sleigh,'" her father recalled. "Santa did a good job in not making a promise Mommy and I won't be able to keep."

Some are concerned because, obviously, a computer Santa is not an equal opportunity kind of guy. Children without home computers or access to their parents' laptops have only the old-fashioned way of reaching him.

"It's going to be a critical issue," Casey said. "If everybody doesn't have access to computers, you're going to end up with information haves and have-nots."

Local volunteers who help answer the letters to on-line addresses such as Santa@north.pole.org say they expect to receive more than 10,000 before Christmas Day. More than 20 million people around the world have access to Santa this year through the Internet, a global collection of interconnected computer networks.

"You can communicate around the globe right now, and what better way to communicate than with Santa at the North Pole," said Jeffrey Guide, who is helping with the Santa project from his job as systems operator for Delphi Internet Services, a commercial computer network.

"The whole way that we receive mail, that we communicate with all of our friends and family, is changing," said Bruce Waldack, president of digitalNATION, which will fax children's wish lists to their parents between now and Christmas Eve. "That was the whole idea of what we are doing, to bring Santa into the digital age."

Most letters come from children. A 4-year-old named Lexi assured Santa that she deserved some gifts, but added, "Please bring me the things I asked you for at the mall, since I don't remember my list now." Jonathan Darlin, a 3-year-old from Knoxville, Tenn., had nearly a dozen quite specific gift suggestions: "I want a Troll, mousetrap, a dog food thing, a sticker . . . a big red toy pickup truck, and I want a tin gun. I say thank you."

The grownups offer thank yous, too, although their entreaties seem more in keeping with holiday spirit than seriousness.

Army Pfc. Donald Morash sent a brief note from his posting in Somalia. "I would like a . . . ticket from Somalia to anywhere in the continental U.S. . . . that's all," Morash wrote. "Make that one-way!" And from Millsaps College, near Jackson, Miss., security officer Donald F. Sullivan insisted to Santa that he would be thrifty if he got \$1 million for Christmas. "I will not spend it all at one time," he said in his electronic letter. "Let me know soon if my chances are good."

Santa hasn't answered yet, but Sullivan is holding out hope. "It's still early yet," he said. "I'm going to give him a while."