

## A shared downtown Christmas, a shared journey in life

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Sean Kirst / The Post-Standard



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Mary and Art Speers: Married 45 years, they unknowingly took the same childhood pilgrimage to see Santa Claus

*To celebrate **A Christmas Story**, which is being performed through Dec. 30 at Syracuse Stage, the Onondaga Historical Association has put together a display about Christmas in Syracuse that includes images of the Yuletide at E.W. Edwards. You can view it before shows at Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.*

On a December morning in the early 1950s, Art Speers and his grandmother left North Syracuse for a well-loved Christmas ritual in downtown Syracuse. Art was a child of six or seven, and the routine was always the same: His grandmother would take him from shop to shop. They would admire window displays along South Salina Street.

Finally, they'd get a hot turkey sandwich at the tearoom in the E.W. Edwards department store, before Art — bursting with excitement — took part in the highlight of the trip:

His grandmother would lead him through a tunnel that opened onto Edwards' "toyland," where **Santa Claus** was waiting on his throne. Even now, at 66, Art can recall each detail: He'd stand in what seemed to be an endless line, until he climbed three steps to visit a Santa "who was not intimidating at all," Art said. "He was very gentle, with a really soft voice."

At least once, Art said, his grandmother paid for a photograph that showed her grandson with Santa. From there, Art would again wait in line for a ride on a holiday monorail that carried children high above the toys, a ride that reminded Art of Flash Gordon, a space-traveling fantasy hero of the era.

More than a decade later, when the 18-year-old Art was visiting his grandfather at Syracuse Memorial Hospital, a young nursing technician caught his eye. Art managed to get her phone number. He called and asked for a date. One thing led to another, and in 1965 Art Speers and Mary Jardine were married.

Mary, raised in Bridgeport, was equally devoted to Christmas. For their first Yuletide, she brought out a few family

decorations. Among them was an old photograph in a paper frame. It was a photo of Mary with Santa Claus, taken at Edwards. Art studied it. While no year was listed on the photograph, every detail of the scene and background around Mary and Santa - right down to the penguin design on the simple paper frame that enclosed it - were identical to the ones used when Art posed for a similar picture.

Then Art glanced at a number at the bottom of Mary's frame, a way for the store to keep track of how many children were photographed with Santa in a given year. Mary's number was 4,973. Art's was 4,884. That's only 89 apart. Art and Mary came to a realization: Since hundreds of children routinely showed up to see Santa, there was a strong chance that the couple - years before they met - had been in Edwards at the same time, on the same day, in the same year.

"Maybe I sat next to him on the ride and never knew it," Mary said.

She and Art now have two sons, and seven grandchildren. They shared their tale with The Post-Standard after **reading about a local man**, Mark Farrington, who also has powerful memories of Santa Claus at Edwards. The column described how Farrington learned that a retired firefighter named Edward McCarthy wore the red suit at the store for many years. Farrington wanted to know more about McCarthy, so he turned to the newspaper for help.



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Provided photo

Childhood photos from the early 1950s of Mary and Art Speers, with Santa Claus at E.W. Edwards: Apparently taken in the same year, on the same day.

The result was a wave of reader reflections about Edwards and Christmas. Judy Baranello-Cupoli sent a note recalling how her dad, Billy Baranello, sat in Santa's throne before the store closed in the 1970s. Billy died on Dec. 6, 1992 - the feast day of St. Nicholas. Farrington also uncovered some details about a retired circus clown named Joe Meyers, who handled Christmas duties at Edwards in the 1960s.

"I'm pretty sure that was my Santa," Farrington said.

As for Edward Aloysius McCarthy, his grandson, Daniel McCarthy, called to say that the retired fire captain - who died in 1961 - was a Santa Claus at Edwards for 13 years. Almost certainly, that's the guy pictured with both Mary and Art Speers, who described him "as the most realistic Santa ever."

The couple said they no longer find Christmas to be quite as magical. When they were children, they knew there wouldn't be much beneath the tree, so they enjoyed a visit to Edwards almost as much as Christmas Day itself. Looking back on it, there is a good chance they were in line at the same time, waiting to ask Santa Claus for something special, although his greatest gift to them came a decade or so later:

"He did his magic," Mary said. She and Art still have each other.

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