

Just Curious about **Mike Leming**

By Felicia Crosby

To anyone who's ever asked the question "Is Santa real?"; our answer is an emphatic "Yes!". In fact, we'd go so far as to argue that, like most of the angels in our lives, he might not be where you'd think to look – the North Pole, for instance. In reality, he *might* be a little more local and just recently retired from a long career teaching at St. Olaf, which also makes the chances quite good that his alter ego's known as something other than Mr. Kringle. But make no mistake about it; children in various parts of the world know Northfield's own **Mike Leming** as someone pretty special, and the gifts he and his wife **Ann** bring make a very real difference in a lot of lives. So here's a little bit about Mike – his connections with his students, with a people and culture half a world away, and his thoughts about uncovering the Santa in each of us (it begins with finding your heart).

Merry Christmas, Mike, from the believers at *The Entertainment Guide*.

A Santa from the Golden State: I was born and raised in Sunland, California, went to college in Santa Barbara and moved to Minnesota in 1971.

Did you have a particular Santa Claus in your childhood?

Yes, Louis Nowell; he was a fireman chief who would come to the elementary school where I attended. He later became a councilman for LA.

What Santa means: I think he represents unconditional love (except the naughty or nice part), generosity, hope and goodness.

Being Santa for believers, young and old: We have times in our lives when we don't believe, but we always want to believe. But when I put on the suit, I see in the eyes of people of all ages the desire to believe. People always treat me with respect, kindness, friendliness and happiness even when they know who I really am. It is as if I represent their highest hopes for their lives. They never stop being children and they don't want their dreams to die.

And on that note: Mike's belief in Santa – in four phases:

- 1) Believe in Santa.
- 2) Don't believe in Santa.
- 3) You are Santa.
- 4) You look like Santa.

You've become quite close to the Karen people of Thailand. How did you come to know them, and what makes the bond so great? I went to Thailand in 1990 and visited a village for two days. I then came back to teach a January course in the village in 1992 and did so for many years. In 1995 I was granted a Pew Foundation grant to write a book on the Karen. Since 2012 I have



brought students to their villages and done development projects. Some of my very best friends are Karen and I have invested much time and money in their villages. Where your treasure is there you will find your heart.

Reaching the children:

When I do Santa, I ask for donations and my wife and I match every gift. People want Santa to come to them and are willing to pay. Their gift is always matched and they have been very generous. But I do more than 3000 children a year without any contributions. This includes the disabled, special education children and the poor.

...and teaching young Oles a new world: I brought students and alums from St. Olaf for 10 years. They have come to do exotic travel but I want them to know deeply the people and to discover in them "the other." I believe that's how can you know America (and oneself) if America (and oneself) is the only thing you know.

After building schools and working with farmers, what's next in Thailand? My next big thing is to build a center for the visual and performing arts for the disabled in Thailand.

If you were able to get in a sleigh on Christmas Eve and deliver one present to the world's children, what would it be?

The gift of understanding that the best of all the gifts and treasures we have cost nothing. In fact, you can't take a picture of the gift I would like to give. It is unconditional love, compassion, caring, respect, kindness given to another human being. It has nothing to do with self; it is all about giving self to others.

...and...how can we each find the Santa inside of ourselves?

By giving unconditional love, compassion, caring, respect, kindness given to another human being. If we are willing to lose ourselves in caring and giving to others, we can find ourselves and our highest dreams.