

Brockton breaks record for most Santa hats

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By Michele Morgan Bolton, Globe Correspondent

BROCKTON -- Sleigh bells were ringing at the corner of Main Street and Crescent streets this afternoon as a sea of residents converged to try to break the city's record for the most people wearing Santa hats in one place.

And they did, amassing 1,792 happy revelers topped in red, crushing last year's city record of 872 hats.

"Everyone has to do their part," screamed organizer John Merian from his perch on the second-floor deck of a city parking garage, earlier in the day. "Let's get this party started."

Young and old swayed in a balmy breeze and danced the Cha Cha Slide to non-Christmasy music like "YMCA" and holiday standards with seasonal characters like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Frosty the Snowman four days before Thanksgiving at the Downtown Brockton Association's third-annual event.

Members hope the Santa Hat Challenge, the city's reputation as the home of the first department store Santa in 1890, and its massive annual Christmas Parade – celebrating 25 years on the coming Saturday – will draw people back to the once-thriving city.

The goal is to cement a new image for the City of Champions as "Christmas Town."

Brockton first set an unofficial Santa hat record in 2008 with 507 hats, only to be outdone when Mullingar, Ireland snatched the title away the next year with 714 residents topped in red headgear.

Brockton surged back last year, totaling 872 hats and setting a second record for the city.

To hit this year's number out of the park, organizers passed out more than 14,000 Santa hats to city schoolchildren and others and raffled off electronic prizes such as iPads and iPods.

Folks were not sure whether the effort would be enough.

"Definitely maybe," said seven-year resident Jody Williams, who volunteers with the city's historical society.

The official count was supposed to be announced this coming Saturday at the parade, but Merian said so many people asked he could not hold out.

Some residents, like Matt O'Brien, who brought sons Patrick, Connor, and Ben, said participation offered multiple opportunities.

"It's nice just to be part of the community," he said. "And it's better than raking leaves."

For Patrick O'Brien, a Hancock School fifth-grader, being part of a potential world record was cool. "And not raking leaves," he said.

Glenna Angelo passed out tickets and extra Santa hats as fast as she could in the one hour she had – from 2:30 to 3:30 -- to get people registered for the count.

“My official title is, ‘Anything They Tell Me to Do,’ ” said Angelo, who originally proposed to Merian that the city try for a world record in some kind of category.

A number of ideas were discussed, she said, including Santa suits. Then Santa hats hit home. “This is how it all evolved,” she said.

Aurelia Jenkins-Portal, a seventh-grader at South Middle School, who wore her pink sash for the Miss Heart of America pageant, an organization that rewards community service, along with her Santa hat, said it felt good to be gathered with so many other people, including nine family members.

“It’s just about having fun,” chimed in her aunt Tana Jenkins.

Merian said he will reach out to Brockton’s Irish nemesis with the goal of becoming sister cities. Until then, it’s just all about community and the magic of Christmas, he said: “This is just the beginning.”

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