

They're hoping for a miracle on Main Street

Brockton believers say city's spirit on parade will show it's capable of a comeback



Parade organizer John Merian transformed his office into a holiday tribute to legendary Brockton businessman James Edgar, the first department store Santa Claus. (Bill Greene/Globe Staff)

By [Peter Schworm](#)

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BROCKTON - Thousands are out of work. Homes and storefronts sit empty. The mall, one of the city's largest taxpayers, is on the auction block, and the beloved baseball team, struggling to make rent, may have played its last game. By any measure, Brockton has had a bitter year.

But today, as though putting a thumb in the eye of all the bad fortune, community leaders are staging a massive celebration, pumping up the city's annual Thanksgiving weekend parade into an extravaganza of badly needed Christmas cheer, complete with 15 marching bands, dozens of floats, and, they hope, record crowds.

"The parade captures the positive and resilient spirit of the city, its essence, like nothing else," said John Merian, president of the Downtown Brockton Association, one of the event's sponsors. "The people are still fighting, and that's what the city's all about."

This year's parade - billed as the biggest and best ever and financed by the city, donations, and local businesses - is all the more poignant after budget cuts this year forced the cancellation of another revered tradition, the Memorial Day parade.

"It's not just the biggest event in the city, it's the biggest yet, and it's coming at a great time," said Lynnel Cox, who runs a professional support service firm and volunteers on the parade committee. "A lot of lights, a lot of sounds, a lot of joy."

In a tribute to legendary Brockton businessman James Edgar, at least 3,000 people are expected to wear Santa Claus hats. Edgar is widely recognized as the country's first department store Santa; even Macy's, the retail giant whose Santa gained legendary status in the holiday classic "Miracle on 34th Street," has acknowledged that Edgar's came first.

Organizers are trying to use the first Santa claim to foster local pride and help unite a city of countless languages and homelands.

Merian, who hopes the parade will eventually establish a world's record for the most people wearing a Santa hat gathered in one place, envisions a time when Brockton, already known as the "City of Champions," will claim the mantle of Christmas Town, USA.

"Why can't we be to Christmas what Salem is to witches?" said Merian, a 50-year-old who is writing a children's book based on Edgar's pioneering Christmas tradition and hopes to establish a permanent Edgar exhibit. "This is where it all started. His story is so genuine, it captures what Christmas is all about."

A fanciful spirit by all accounts, Edgar believed that children should be able to visit Santa, once wryly lamenting that he had "never been able to understand why the great gentleman lives at the North Pole. He is so far away." His impersonation of Santa at his downtown dry goods store thrilled the legions of youngsters who flocked to see him and left awestruck.

"You can't imagine what it was like," longtime Brockton resident Ed Pearson recalled in a 1969 article in "Yankee Magazine." "I remember walking down an aisle and all of a sudden right in front of me, I saw Santa Claus. I couldn't believe my eyes."

On Wednesday, Merian was putting the finishing touches on his holiday decorations, transforming his storefront into Edgar's department store, circa 1900. In one window, two blown-up photos of Main Street from 1898 formed a giant mural in front of a sprawling train set. In a nearby room, where dozens of paper snowflakes dangled from the ceiling, wreathes and stockings hung from the wall, and a Santa's throne sat by a faux fireplace. "This whole place will come to life," Merian, a father of four, said with a childlike gleam in his eye. "You can already feel the spirit."

Organizers hope that spirit carries into the rest of the year, invigorating a listless area with long stretches of vacant buildings and offices. Moises Rodrigues, the city's community services director, said residents have rallied around the parade, volunteering in unprecedented numbers to make this edition special.

"It's gotten bigger as the situation has gotten worse," he said.

Like many other postindustrial New England cities, Brockton has struggled economically for years, and this year's downturn has delivered a cruel blow. Unemployment has surged, and the city's foreclosure rate is among the state's highest. A number of proposed development efforts, including a \$91 million residential and retail complex slated for downtown, have been shelved, and hopes for a new multiplex theater are dwindling.

"Brockton has been hit hard, no doubt about it, and this will be a hard holidays for a lot of people," said Dennis Eaniri, a city councilor. "But it's times like these you need to be doing these positive things. It puts smiles on people's faces, no matter how hard things are."

Like Merian, Eaniri, 55, remembers a time when downtown was a destination, when "Main Street was always moving." He doubts it will ever be quite the same, but says the holiday parade harkens back to those days.

"We'd all like to see it the way it was," he said. "The morning of the parade, it's so nice to see the parking garage packed, to see people waving at you from the third level, wishing you Merry Christmas."

But Merian's mission is more than nostalgic. Even if the old department stores and dozens of shoe shops aren't coming back, downtown events can help bring together people from different walks of life.

"If you get people to feel like they belong, there's a chance they'll invest in where they are," he said. "They aren't black or white anymore, Haitian or Armenian. They're Brocktonians."

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