

## *Taking flight with Santa, a little boy soars above sorrow* **Magical gift brightens a dark night**

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The Kansas City Star

In the early weeks of December 2001, there were good days for Hannah Saulsbury.

Days when she could play like any other toddler. Days when she asked to have her fingernails painted with polish. Days when the 3 year-old didn't feel the pain -- the "owies," she called it -- from her cancer.

Her 5-year-old brother, Hunter, didn't care that Hannah was bald from her radiation therapy. "Bubba" just liked being with her.

And Christmas was almost here, with all its' magic of Santa Claus and reindeer and baby Jesus' birthday rolled into one. One morning during play, Hannah and Hunter had great fun pretending they were at the North Pole with Santa.

Maybe it wasn't mere coincidence that at that moment their mommy, Valerie Saulsbury, overheard them. Or that a man telephoned hours later saying an organization wanted to give Hannah a Christmas gift because of her illness.

The man, known as Chief Elf, was with the Elves of Christmas Present, a local group that tries to make Christmas extra special for a few families who have had a difficult year.

The Elves' gifts can be extraordinary. Once they brought mountains to a boy who was too sick to go to the mountains himself. Another time they added bedrooms to a second-story addition on Christmas Eve, working all night to keep a father's promise.

Adults never really believe that the Elves can execute their grandiose plans. Saulsbury doubted, too. Still, she told Chief Elf about their pretend game of visiting the North Pole with Santa.

"I laughed as I told him, thinking it was too far out," she remembered. But it was exactly what Chief Elf wanted to hear.



Photo courtesy of the Elves of Christmas Present

**Just before taking 5-year-old Hunter Saulsbury on a Christmas Eve flight, Santa opened his book to Hunter's page. "it says right here that you were a big help to your sister Hannah. I'm very proud of you for that."**

She didn't know that the Elves have great connections -- including a very special link with Santa himself -- who is often a co-conspirator with them.

Days later Chief Elf called again: How would Hannah and Hunter like to fly with Santa on Christmas Eve?

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When Santa got the request from Chief Elf, he wasn't so sure about the flying part.

His sleigh was not an option for anyone except himself. It has only one seat belt, he said. "A sharp turn and we'd lose everybody."

Chief Elf had a much better idea than a cold, open-air sleigh. An elf in Kansas City was also a pilot, with a helicopter available.

At first, Santa wasn't thrilled about that plan, either. Standing 6 feet tall and weighing 350 pounds, he was nervous

about fitting inside a flying machine.

But he remembered the trials the Saulsbury family had endured. He knew it was a universal childhood fantasy to fly with Santa.

So he agreed. Hannah and Hunter would be the only children in the world to help him deliver gifts to one family on Christmas Eve.

The children were ecstatic when their parents told them about the honor.

Hannah, gesturing with her hands wide, told her grandparents and all her nurses and doctors at Children's Mercy Hospital. Hunter told some of his fellow kindergartners but was more reserved.

"I didn't tell a lot of other kids," he said later. "I didn't want them to feel bad because they weren't chosen."

Days passed. Brother and sister talked each night about the ride. Hannah couldn't mention it without giggling.

"Her expressions were so vivid," said Valerie Saulsbury. "Maybe even more so

because she didn't have any hair. Her big blue eyes...she was so thrilled."

But a few nights before Christmas Eve, Hannah's bubbly personality faded. On Christmas Eve morning, hours before liftoff, something was terribly wrong. Hannah was listless, her breathing raspy. At noon her family called 911.

In the ambulance, oxygen revived her. The paramedics asked her whether she had any pain. She shook her head no. But her mommy knew better.

"Hannah, it's OK to say if you have owies. Do you?"

Hannah slowly nodded her head yes and began to cry.

Then she lost consciousness and didn't feel the pain anymore.

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The next few hours at Children's Mercy Hospital were a blur to the Saulsbury family.

The medical staff's voices sounded distant to Hannah's parents: "She's not in pain, but she's bleeding internally....Is there anyone you want to call? She's not responding....Do you have a do-not-resuscitate order on your daughter? What should we do if her heart stops?"

Valerie Saulsbury cradled Hannah in her arms. This wasn't supposed to be happening yet. The doctors had told them they had more time.

She looked down at her daughter again. Hannah's body was bruised and swollen from the cancer. Any resuscitation would probably break her ribs. Valerie looked at Wylie, Hannah's daddy.

"We'll have to let her go if it comes to that," she told the staff.

At 3:50 p.m. the blips on Hannah's heart monitor began slowing, and then stopped. The family held one another and said their goodbyes. Hunter leaned over Hannah, whispering: "You won't have to take that yucky medicine any more."

But Valerie couldn't stop holding her little girl. A nurse suggested they give Hannah a bath. Together they painted her fingernails once more, and then dressed her in her flowered pajamas. After four hours, Valerie let her daughter go.

The drive home on Christmas Eve was the loneliest ride the family ever took.

At home, their phone message light

was blinking. It was Chief Elf, trying in vain to reach them, leaving almost a dozen messages wondering where they were.

Valerie called, telling him about Hannah. Then she hesitated, with the silence hanging in the air: "Could Hunter still go? We don't want him to remember Christmas as the day his sister died.

Chief Elf swallowed hard.

"Of course," he said.

Santa, the pilot and the ground crew learned of Hannah's death 10 minutes before takeoff. Santa's tears formed icicles on his beard. He prayed for the right words to say to the family. Not feeling jolly or merry, he tried hard to pull himself together.

Before long a car's headlights glimmered in a near-empty parking lot at Johnson County Executive Airport.

It was the Saulsbury's



Photo courtesy of the Elves of Christmas Present  
**As Christmas 2001 approached, Hannah and Hunter Saulsbury, seen in a picture from 2000, imagined they were at the North Pole with Santa Claus. Wanting to help Hannah (right), who had cancer, the Elves of Christmas Present had found the inspiration for a remarkable Christmas gift.**

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Christmas Eve had turned bitterly cold. So cold that even through his velveteen suit, long johns and natural padding, Santa was still freezing. As the helicopter's engines warmed up, the propeller wash felt like an Arctic blast.

Santa saw a little boy climb out of the car, and then two young parents, their eyes haggard.

Earlier that day Santa had two Santa hats specially made for Hunter and

Hannah. But as he waited inside the Kansas City Aviation Center's lobby, he slipped Hannah's hat into his pocket.

"I'm sorry about Hannah," Santa said to the family, after an awkward silence. Hunter looked away. The Saulsbury's nodded.

Clearing his throat, Santa looked at Hunter and said: "Now, let's talk about you." He picked up a 3-inch-thick book covered in red felt, titled Santa Book in white felt letters.

The book was a record of all the good boys and girls Santa had visited so far in 2001. He turned to Hunter's page.

Hunter's eyes grew wide as Santa named the Saulsbury's pets, Hunter's buddies and Hunter's hobbies. Then he squinted at one last note scrawled in the margin.

Santa hesitated, and then looked deep into Hunter's blue eyes.

"It says right here that you were a big help to your sister Hannah. I'm very proud of you for that."

Santa moved on, telling him about the family they were delivering presents to. Hunter's job was to protect the sack of gifts until the helicopter landed. But Hunter had a question.

"Where is the sleigh or the reindeer?" he asked, doubt seeping into his voice. Santa explained about the reindeer's fatigue after traveling around the world, that they were grazing in a field nearby. He told him about the sleigh's small space and its lone seat belt, and how the helicopter was big enough for all of them.

Hunter forgot his disappointment when the ground crew led the family to the chopper and handed out headsets so that everyone could talk to one another. Seat belts clicked. The helicopter's engines revved up. And within minutes they were airborne.

The helicopter sped through the cold night air, pausing to float above the best Christmas lights in Kansas City: the Plaza.

There were spires and domes outlined in red, green and white lights. A horse pulled an illuminated buggy, inching its way down 47th Street. Last-minute shoppers darted from store to store.

Santa told Hunter a story about how the reindeer had gotten their job pulling the sleigh. First he tried elephants, he said, because they were so strong. But they were too heavy for rooftops. He tried

horses, too, but they were scared of heights. Kangaroos made Santa sleighsick with all their jumping.

Ostriches -- he learned the hard way -- couldn't fly at all. Flamingos were too weak, requiring exactly 422 of them just to make the sleigh lurch forward. And their pink feathers certainly clashed with his red suit.

As Santa talked, a noise like soft music filtered through all the headsets.

Hunter was giggling.



NORMAN NG/ The Kansas City Star  
**Santa paid a reunion visit to Hunter on Saturday night at the Saulsburys' Olathe home. A year after his priceless Christmas gift, Hunter can smile about another: Baby sister Macy Hannah was born in September.**

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The helicopter was approaching its goal: a home in a cul-de-sac in Olathe named Sleepy Hollow, where Santa and Hunter would deliver presents.

Directly below the helicopter was an innovative landing pad. Like a giant letter C, six vehicles faced outward in driveways, angling their high beam headlights to the center, red emergency lights flashing. A ground crewman waved a flashlight upward directing the pilot, while also making sure that people kept a safe distance from the helicopter's rear rotors.

Crowds of people gathered. Cars along the street slowed, too. The curious gawked at a helicopter landing in the suburbs.

Santa exited first. He was going to slip down the chimney and then open the home's front door for the others. Hunter

leaped out next, hoisting Santa's sack over one shoulder, like an elf pro. He was grinning so wide at the front door that Santa had to laugh.

But there was a moment of panic: Santa had trudged black, sooty footprints on the light shag rug leading from the chimney to the front door.

"Oh, no!" he whispered, squatting down trying to rub away the soiled stains. "This happens sometimes," he told Hunter. Hunter tried to help him clean up the mess, too.

Santa worked quickly, arranging the presents expertly under the Christmas tree. There were cookies and milk, which Santa offered to the Saulsburys, and a carrot for the reindeer. In less than 10 minutes their good deed was done, but not before Santa noted that Hunter's face glowed, right along with his parents'.

The helicopter's engines whined. Blades twirled faster.

Airborne once more, the pilot asked Hunter what his favorite color of Christmas lights was.

"Blue!" he said, without any hesitation.

So off they flew, looking for as many blue lights as they could see from the air. That's when Wylie Saulsbury noticed they were near their own house.

But something was different.

The Saulsburys' subdivision in Olathe has more than 30 homes. But as they looked down, only one house had its Christmas lights on -- their own.

The helicopter flew closer.

Hours before, word of Hannah's death had spread quickly. Many neighbors stood in their doorways and cried as they heard, remembering the little girl with curls flying, playing up and down their street.

As a way to honor the brightness of her short life, they had turned off their own

Christmas lights and darkened their homes. Others stripped strands of lights from their own shrubbery and trees to create one shining memorial for the Saulsburys.

An 8-foot birch in the Saulsburys' front yard now glowed with hundreds of lights -- Hannah's Tree.

Their plan was to surprise the Saulsburys when they arrived from the hospital. They didn't know the family was in a helicopter flying with Santa, 500 feet above them.

Then Hunter's voice spoke above the drone of the engines.

"I wish Hannah was here."

No one uttered a word.

But the pilot's eyes were so blurred with tears that he struggled to land the chopper. On the cold tarmac, Santa hugged Hunter.

"She was here, too," he said, handing him Hannah's Santa hat from his pocket.

"She was right here with us, Hunter."

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The new year brought happiness once more to the Saulsburys.

The little birch tree survived the January ice storm. Although buffeted by harsh winds, it didn't break.

Soon they received another priceless gift: Valerie was pregnant.

On Sept. 27, Macy Hannah Saulsbury was born. On a recent day Valerie cradled her tiny daughter. Macy cooed and smiled, her eyes as big and blue as Hannah's were.

The family's Christmas stockings were hung by the fireplace, including Hannah's. Hunter, now 6, hung it there himself.

He still hasn't told many people about his ride, for the same reasons he didn't tell them before. But his belief in Santa Claus is rock-solid.

He has proof, he said, remembering the sooty footprints. And because he is an eyewitness authority -- being the only kid in the world to fly with Santa on Christmas Eve -- he wants all nonbelievers to know something.

"Any kid who doesn't believe in Santa Claus, well, I feel really sorry for them.... All their presents probably do just come from their parents."

