

## **Alaska Air's 'Santa One' Takes Off For Disadvantaged Kids**

Inland Northwest BTA Allied members lifted 60 disadvantaged children to an unforgettable holiday trip. The kids and their personal elves boarded flight 1225 Alaska Airlines' "Santa One" at Spokane International Airport bound for "the North Pole." The kids, who are between the ages of 4 and 10, are selected from programs for homeless and underprivileged kids in the Spokane and Coeur d'Alene, ID, areas for this once-in-a-lifetime fantasy adventure to Santa's home.

A number of other airlines, including United and Continental, have been doing the North Pole "flights" in various cities, some for nearly 20 years. But Alaska is the only airline to actually take the kids aloft for their magical trip. As the flight nears its conclusion, the window shades are pulled down and the elves and children say the magic words that allow them to land at the North Pole – on the other side of Spokane International Airport.

There they're greeted by Santa and Mrs. Claus and an additional host of elves.

"When we send out invitations to the kids, we have them give us a wish list of what they want for Christmas," explains "Bernie" the Head Elf, better known as Steve Paul, president and CEO of Northwest North Pole Adventures, the nonprofit group that runs the event. "We take those lists and buy each of them a toy from that list. So as each child tells Santa what he or she wants, Santa can reach into his bag and pull that present out for them," adds Paul "The looks on their faces as he hands it to them is priceless."

To ensure that only the most deserving children are selected, Paul's non-profit works exclusively with the area's social agencies. This year Northwest North Pole Adventures lined up \$150,000 in cash and in-kind donations and contributions.

The children are picked up at the Spokane YWCA in the early afternoon and driven to the airport, where each child is given a "passport" to the North Pole and a personal "elf" catering to every need, including a backpack filled with school supplies. Then they board the plane, designated Flight 1225.

The flight has priority status with the FAA once it's loaded and ready to fly and "Santa One" comes up on the screen. Then the flight's own personal air traffic controller takes over, Paul says. "It becomes just like Air Force One in that respect."

"The Fantasy Flight is an unforgettable experience for everyone involved. It's a true delight for the children," according to Brad Tilden, Alaska Airlines president who was on hand for this year's event. "And our employees, who eagerly volunteer every year, get far more back than the time they put in."

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