



Share the holiday spirit with these 13 gifts that give back >

MOVIES

'Dear Santa' takes viewers behind the scenes of Postal Service's Operation Santa

The USPS receives hundreds of thousands of letters to Santa each year.



— The new documentary "Dear Santa" highlights the USPS' Operation Santa program. Courtesy IFC Films

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By Randee Dawn

Santa Claus is totally amazing, delivering millions of presents to children all over the world each year.

But even Santa can use some extra elf help during the holiday season. And in the new documentary "Dear Santa," directed by Dana Nachman, audiences get to meet elves from around the U.S., plus the children who've asked for special presents for Christmas and discover just how

important the United States Postal Service is to the whole enterprise through its Operation Santa program.

"I wanted to showcase something that happens to everyone in our country, whether you're from a red state or a blue state or in a rural state or an urban city," Nachman told TODAY. "Kids who write these letters can be needy or wealthy. It's agnostic to all the things that divide us now. And it's not just about kids who need coats or want something silly – this movie is about the inner workings of kids' brains. One person in the film says, 'It's like messages in a bottle we can read from little kids.' And it is!"

Dear Santa - Official Trailer | HD | IFC Films



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Operation Santa is a yearly initiative started by the USPS in 1912, and allows kids to send letters to Santa asking for presents – or sometimes basic necessities. The Postal Service then makes sure that volunteer elves take care of those letters and provide responses, and, if possible the asked-for-wishes to the children.

Last year during the holiday season around 12,000 letters got adopted, with the majority arriving in the last 10 days before Christmas. But for various reasons, including the pandemic crisis, that number has skyrocketed this year to 22,000 as of mid-December.



— Just some of the letters destined for Santa, via the USPS. Courtesy IFC Films

"It's about hopes and dreams, period," said Nachman, whose film follows some amazing deliveries: Children receive pets, coats and toys, while parents receive furniture, just for a start. And the reactions from the little kids during their interviews is even more adorable than a frosted sugar cookie.

"Focusing on the children was a way to narrate the world of Christmas," said Nachman, who filmed everything in the pre-COVID-19 era of last November and December. "We all remember being little, and the magic of childhood and wonder of Santa. Everything about Christmastime is family, friends and community magic – and I wanted that to be front and center in the film. There were so many funny things the kids said ... like, five times the amount I had room for."

In fact, Christmas has such wide-ranging appeal that Nachman, who is Jewish, said she's a huge fan of the holiday and has been since she was a child. The whole idea for the film even came from her mother, who gave her a book about Operation Santa. But as she noted, the idea of community giving isn't restricted to Christmas; the film features volunteers from multiple religions.



— Elves come in all shapes and sizes, and from all backgrounds. Courtesy IFC Films

"We 100% identify with Judaism," said Nachman, whose son recently had a remote bar mitzvah. "But this is a secular film. There's a Jewish phrase: 'tikkun olam,' which means to 'repair the world.' I feel a program like this is repairing the world. We should all be in an effort to repair the world."

And good news: Nachman says she's hoping to do a new "Dear Santa" film every year (with 2020 being the exception). Now that's a present everyone can get behind.



— Everyone loves getting gifts! Courtesy IFC Films

"Dear Santa" is available in theaters and as video on demand on platforms including Peacock, YouTube, Tubi and Pluto. And if you're interested in sending a letter in for next year, check out the USPS website devoted to how you can write to Santa and his elves.

Meet Salvation Army volunteer with remarkable resemblance to Santa