After 43 years, Madison Fire Department's Santa to retire

So this is how it ends for Santa Claus.

He doesn't get stuck in a chimney, or shot by a jealous husband, or — maybe the most likely Madison scenario — he does not end up in court contesting a ticket because he parked his sleigh on the even-numbered side of the street on Christmas Eve.

Rather, it ends with Santa sipping a cup of coffee in a shop off Fish Hatchery Road Tuesday morning, realizing there are too many people to thank.

Santa sighed. "So many people have been truly dedicated to this program," he said.

Dick Lindauer, who has dressed as Santa for the Madison Fire Department for 43 years — and has been part of the program for a full 50 — is stepping down after this Christmas season.

"This is it," Lindauer, 73, said. "My last hurrah."

Lindauer will don his Santa suit — which is kept in cold storage at Savidusky's — one final time on Dec. 18, for the Fire Fighters Local 311 annual party from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Coliseum Bar. The public is invited.

He'll then donate the Santa suit to the State of Wisconsin Fire and Police Hall of Fame in Superior, which inducted Lindauer — known far and wide as "Lindy" — in 2003.

By the time of that last party, Lindauer — as Santa — already will have visited all the Madison hospitals, bringing joy to ill children.

Is there any nobler pursuit? Lindauer himself lost a teenage daughter to leukemia, and it was Dick who suggested that Santa's annual tour be expanded to include UW's American Family Children's Hospital.

That first happened in 1985. The children, some of them desperately ill, would line the hospital's windows and wave as Santa arrived via Med Flight.

The fire department's Santa program dates to the late 1940s. Ed Durkin — father of the Ed Durkin who was fire chief in the 1980s — was the first Santa. He was followed by Art Emerson, a fire captain, who served as Santa until 1967, when Lindauer — who had responsibility for organizing the Santa program when he joined the department in 1960 — took over.

"I had been setting the dates," Lindauer said. "I just put the suit on."

The support staff has grown with the program over the years. Other firefighters, active and retired — Lindauer calls them "elves" — have made a huge contribution. A couple of them, Mike Fuss and Tom Ulrich, met Lindauer for coffee Tuesday. Fuss is the department's historian. Ulrich's dad, Walt Ulrich — who turned 100 this year — refurbished the sleigh, bought at an auction for $8, that Lindauer still takes to his appearances.

People outside the department, too many to list, have also been involved. Lindauer mentioned Theresa Mahlik, who was touched by the Santa program when she was a young girl, and now contributes a bag of toys every year. And there's Rick Karls, who donates some 20 stuffed animals each Christmas. The majority of the toys every year are made possible by Fire Fighters Local 311 Charities.

Lindauer made the first appearance of his last season this past weekend with a stop at the Wisconsin Air National Guard's 115th Fighter Wing.

He's taken Santa to Downtown Madison often over the years. On Tuesday, Lindauer pointed to a 1986 photo of himself taken with Don Robinson, the late, great actor and marvelous man who played Scrooge for so many years in "A Christmas Carol." The two, in costume, were standing at the top of State Street.
Two years later, Lindauer flipped the switch that illuminated 50,000 lights on 120 trees on State Street and the Capitol Square.

The most meaningful appearances, of course, have always involved kids. They won't end with Lindauer's run, either. A Madison firefighter, Gary Schreiber, will put on a Santa suit starting next year.

He knows as well as anybody it's a big suit to fill. Dick Lindauer could brighten any room, no matter how dark. In that 1986 photo, Don Robinson has a grin that reaches his eyes. Leave it to Santa to make Scrooge smile.

*Story by: Doug Moe, Wis State Journal*