

a good estimate.

"You gotta hand it to Rouse. They spare no expense for Christmas. Like, the set I work on I think cost \$125,000. It's a huge set in front of Bamberger's near the glass-enclosed elevators. You know, it's Santa's village. Mechanical elves hammering and like that. . . .

"My knees bother me for a month or two afterwards. But that's not the worst part. The worst part is the afterimage from the strobes. I get a strobe for every child, whether they pay for the picture with me or not. Every child. I see spots for months. Last year until April. And I have nightmares. No kidding. Last week I woke up and bolted upright in the bed, smiling, waiting for the flash. I am not kidding. Everything is 'Get a smile.' That's all they want. They want me to look good. I am

a set. I'm part of the set. I'm not real. I'm there to smile so they can have their Polaroid picture, and I'm supposed to smile and keep my cool. Even when I see a lot of child abuse and it's very hard to keep cool. Like these mothers smacking their kids or verbal abuse. Anybody who works with children will tell you that, that they see a lot of child abuse in public; it's shocking. I really like the kids. They're so innocent. They're undamaged by society. They're pure as human beings go. They love Santa. They come to see him and they end up getting smacked by their mothers. I make sure they get a minute of love from Santa.

"A lot of people make some really strange comments and cracks to me about me being Santa, putting kids on my lap. 'Ho, ho, ho, what

are you into?' and all that. But I come back at them. They don't know what they're talking about. They're playing their fantasy. I've dealt with people's fantasies long enough in business to know that if people say things like that, they're giving you their fantasy. I'm afraid sex with children is much more prevalent in this country than people think, or at least the fantasy of it. I get a lot of comments about that.

"But the most interesting thing I get is the sexual fantasies women have for Santa Claus. From very young to somebody who is in their eighties. I had one incident the year before last that a grandmother, very good-looking, well dressed, she was on one knee and her granddaughter on the other knee. And Grandma had been drinking, 'cause sometimes the

lines last an hour or so, and she was French-kissing me, really, putting the big make on me, while her granddaughter was sitting on the other knee. When I go for a break, I'll have cards left on my chair inviting me over for cocktails and stuff. It's very much that way. If I was interested that would be my biggest temptation. . . .

"Basically, I have 35 days of Muzak, upbeat Christmas carols, kids, mothers, grandmothers. Look, Santa is merchandising. The Japanese use him year round for merchandising. But everybody loves Santa, and everybody's happy. The children, the parents, the merchandisers, myself, everybody. We do it for love, we do it for money.

"America needs Santa Claus. Santa's a good concept."

—Mike Sager

NewsReal

HERBAL ESSENCE

There aren't many alternatives to the standard \$14.95 evergreen wreath, about 50,000 of which will be sold in the Washington area this month. But thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit of a farmer from West Virginia, this Christmas some of Washington's best hotels and restaurants—not to mention homes and offices—will be decorated with pale, fragrant wreaths made of dried herbs.

Charlie Coiner has all the trappings of a hippie: long hair, durable old clothes, a beat-up van—everything but a Grateful Dead bumper sticker. But beneath that veneer beats the heart of a capitalist.

Coiner's farm, the Rock Garden, was established in 1977 as a commune. Since then it has evolved into a serious business, and though Coiner still isn't willing to forsake the ideals that led him to the country, he is being drawn into the corporate mainstream. The Rock Garden once produced organic herbs and vegetables for the commune's members and a few local health food stores, but today it's a major supplier of fresh herbs in the Washington area; it sells about 1,000 bunches of various herbs a week to local Safeway stores, for example.

The Rock Garden also sells herbal wreaths, charging about \$30 for 14-inch ones and about \$400 for six-foot ones. Nora Pouillon, the owner of Restaurant Nora near Dupont Circle, suggested that he make and sell them several years ago when he complained about the long winter down time at the farm. "The idea seemed perfect," Coiner says.

The Christmas wreath sales season is only six weeks long, but making the wreaths requires a full year of labor. Coiner explains: "In January the seeds are ordered. In early spring they are planted in pots that are sheltered in the barn. In May the seedlings are

transferred to the fields with the help of eight employees. The summer is spent tending, irrigating, and praying over the plants."

In the fall, he says, the herbs are harvested and dried; the wreaths are assembled and sold during November and December. "About a third of the Rock Garden's \$125,000 annual business is in wreaths," he notes.

Coiner says that the Rock Garden grosses about \$15,000 from each of the eight acres that it farms. In contrast, he says, his neighbor's farm grosses only about \$600 an acre. Coiner says that what makes the huge difference is eliminating middlemen, who make most of the profits in agribusiness; he retails most of the Rock Garden's wreaths himself and makes about \$15 apiece. When he sells the wreaths wholesale, he says, he makes only about \$2 apiece.

Coiner wholesales to outlets such as Sutton Place Gourmet, Giant's Someplace Special, and the "social" Safeway in Georgetown. His biggest profits, however, come from the large custom-made wreaths he sells to restaurants and hotels—Restaurant Nora, the Hyatt Regency, the Sheraton Washington, the Jefferson, and the Hay-Adams—and from the smaller ones he sells at Eastern Market.

All of the herbs used in the wreaths are grown at the Rock Garden. They include lavender, sage, opal basil, peppermint, chive, pineapple sage, lemon verbena, cayenne pepper, artemisia, lamb's ear, and celosia.

Rose Narva, the president of the Hay-Adams, has been buying wreaths from Coiner since he started making them in 1981. Two years ago, Narva says, she sent one to Ron and Nancy Reagan as a Christmas present. Narva, who says she is impressed by Coiner's "honesty and soft sell," plans to buy about a dozen wreaths from him this year.

Michael Such, the former food and beverage director of the Jefferson, says that he's impressed by Coiner's "carefree attitude, excitement, and obvious caring for his herbs and wreaths."

One of Coiner's fears is that he "will someday succumb to becoming a hard-core capitalist."

He probably has already.

—Carl Jerome