



Photos: Bear Alaska Photography

# Climate Control: Self Storage for Santa's Neighborhood

*North Pole storage pioneers demonstrate their community spirit all year long.*

By Mark Wright

Even Santa Claus needs self storage space—at least up until December 24. The big guy's neighbors in North Pole, Alaska, need plenty, too, and thanks to the entrepreneurial duo of Howard “Buzz” Otis and his wife of 28 years, Renee Webb Otis, Forbes Storage is there to oblige.

Renee is the owner. “She works closely with our staff to keep things running smoothly,” explains Buzz. They have three children—Ben 21, Patrick 15 and Jenna 12.

Buzz is a former contractor and now a real estate developer who grew up in Michigan. He moved to Alaska in January 1975. (Yeah, *January*.) “I always liked the opportunity, the people, the ruggedness of the state, its vast geography,” he says.

The pair saw the potential for self storage and bought an existing facility in 2002. “It was all outdoor units, cold storage, non-climate controlled,” he recalls, but it operated year-round.

While that might sound to folks in the Lower 48 like a brutal set up for a subzero environment like the North Pole, Buzz says it actually works fine. “We have a dry climate, so things store well. It just gets cold.”

They added four more buildings between 2002 and 2006, then built a two-story, climate controlled facility for a total offering of 48,000 sq. ft. of storage space. The new facility includes a pass-coded entrance through which tenants can back-in a vehicle to load and unload in indoor warmth. (Of course, outdoor units are still available—for hardy tenants.)

They recently completed a 15,000 sq. ft. annex eight miles west of the North Pole store that features a kiosk for 24/7 rentals. The site was completed in October.

Buzz says North Pole-area tenants typically store normal household goods, as well as outdoor-oriented equipment like four-wheelers and snow machines. Every now and then, though, they encounter customers with needs not likely seen south of our nation’s 49th state.

“We just had a request from an Alaskan Native group to store some walrus skins that had gotten wet while being used in blanket toss ceremonies,” says Buzz. “They wanted to dry them out in our warm storage.”

And then there are Santa’s many helpers.

## Schmoozing with Santa

While most kids know Santa lives at the North Pole, they might not realize the place really is a vibrant town full of regular folks who love Alaska as their year-round home. (Learn more about the place at [www.northpole-alaska.com](http://www.northpole-alaska.com).) North Pole draws visitors from around the globe—during the summer to enjoy the midnight sun, and in December to revel in holiday magic, gaze in awe at the Northern Lights, and maybe, just maybe, to catch a glimpse of a certain jolly old elf wearing a red felt suit.

That suit played an interesting role in helping the town live up to its name, although not how you might think. Six decades ago, a newcomer to nearby Fairbanks named Con Miller would occasionally don a Santa suit. He apparently fit the part so well that a local kid greeted him as the genuine Santa Claus one day—which gave the entrepreneurial Miller an idea. He opened a trading post called the Santa Claus House in 1952.

The rest is history—which you can read online at [www.santaclaushouse.com](http://www.santaclaushouse.com). (Yes, even Santa has embraced the Internet.) The Santa Claus House is a thriving, family-run retail operation and a major part of the North Pole community—reindeer included.

Forbes Storage’s location, just two blocks down from the Santa Claus House, helps put it in the center of action at the North Pole. And the Otises make the most of it.

“We support ‘Christmas in Ice,’” says Buzz, “a huge, month-long community event that starts with the ice sculpting competition on December 5.” Take a look at [www.christmasinice.org](http://www.christmasinice.org). Buzz and Renee provide storage for the ice harvest equipment, lights, and ice sculpting tools, as well as share their office space with event organizers.

## Serving the Community

Buzz is also very active in the business community. He serves as interim director of the North Pole Economic Development Corporation—an unpaid, part-time gig that keeps him busy about three days a week. He agreed to run it until they can afford to hire a full-time executive director.

“My dad always told me to leave a place better than you found it,” explains Buzz. “Call it ‘pay it forward,’ call it karma...it makes you feel good.”

In addition to being a chamber of commerce member, he serves on the board of the Alaska Support Industry

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*Buzz and Renee Otis, outside of Forbes Storage in North Pole, Alaska.*

Alliance, a trade organization for companies that provide goods and services to the oil, gas and mining industries. Buzz participates in the Alliance “because the state relies heavily on the natural resource industry,” he observes. “It’s important for Alaskans to support development,” which generates new jobs. He also serves on the statewide Red Cross board.

### Facing Challenges

The state’s unemployment is higher than normal right now, he adds, due to the recession. Tourism and other sectors of the Alaskan economy are off, although he notes that “we always experience seasonal unemployment in the winter months. When the ground’s frozen, there’s less construction, no fishing, less tourism.”

Rentals do fluctuate, says Buzz, but not so much on a seasonal basis. Business depends more on what the housing market or the military is doing, or the strength of the construction market.

Living in Alaska does have its challenges, Buzz admits. “The darkness tends to bother you, when you have only three hours of daylight on the winter solstice. But on the

other hand, we have beautiful summers, with 24 hours of sunshine at the season’s peak. It’s a great state if you enjoy the outdoors. We don’t have some amenities, but it’s a good place to raise your kids. The whole state has only 650,000 people, so there are lots of ways to get involved and give back.”

Giving back is clearly a hallmark for the Otises. Buzz was involved in the SSA’s lobbying effort to roll back the development of on-base self storage by the military. While he is an ardent supporter of military personnel and the nearby Army and Air Force installations—Fort Wainwright and Eielson Air Force Base, respectively—the military’s forays into on-base storage really upset him. He’s happy to have had the opportunity to educate Alaska’s Congressional delegation about the problems this posed for private enterprise—and he’s really happy the SSA’s efforts prevailed, he says.

“We strive to always thank the military for their service to our country,” Buzz emphasizes. And that attitude of gratitude extends to all their tenants. “We find that customers often need someone to confide in for a few minutes and we encourage our staff to listen and offer a word of encouragement to those who need it. We strive to always be professional and give the customer the benefit of the doubt. After all, we live in a community whose slogan is: ‘Where the Spirit of Christmas lives year-round!’” ❖

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