



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Keeping her life on track

Petaluman Hope Stewart finds her garden train hobby therapeutic in the midst of tough times

By [Yovanna Bieberich](#)

ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Published: Thursday, October 24, 2013 at 9:55 a.m.

When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade, and that's exactly what Petaluman Hope Stewart did when life took a sad turn.

In her small 20 foot by 60 foot back yard, the semi-retired photographer has created a magical world away from her worries with a G (garden) scale model train railway.

With a flick of a switch, Stewart's east side yard comes to life with "Little Annie M," a little red steam engine named after her mother, clickity-clacking down the track past tiny farms, miniature log cabins, and through a town she built, called Bliss — population 73.

"We're working on increasing the town population," says Stewart, whose imagination and creativity have turned her back yard into a happy oasis in the middle of some difficult times.

"It's been very good therapy," says Stewart. "I've always wanted a garden train. My dad built a train set for me when I was 5. It was a G scale train he set up for Christmas. He built another one in the cellar after my brother was born."

A native of New Jersey, Stewart never forgot her father's train sets. Even after life brought her to California, she still carried a love for the hobby, but never dreamed she would take it up until her husband, Gordon, became ill with dementia.

"His issues started to surface in 1996 after he retired and we moved to Petaluma," she says. "He is in the advanced stages of it now."

In 2007, she made the difficult decision to place Gordon in a skilled nursing facility in Petaluma. Though she visits him often, she admits she needed something fun and relaxing to occupy her mind when she came home.

"It was hard," says Stewart, whose cheerful tone turns serious when mentioning her husband. "We were going to grow old together. Life throws you a tough deck of cards sometimes."

That's when Stewart stumbled across an article about garden trains by hobbyist Ben Moore.

"He wrote about his railroads and made up wonderful stories," says Stewart. "He had lots of fun with it. Something about all this clicked for me and I decided I wanted to do this. I made a pact with myself that I would spend my days with Gordon, and then work on the train at night."

Excited about a new adventure, she joined the Redwood Empire Garden Railway

Society and began learning everything she could about model trains. As most hobbyists are, they were eager to educate and help her out. They immediately warned her to keep her first train layout simple, and not to go too crazy on accessories and other items she may not need.

The largest of the model trains, G scale engines and cars are 17 inches long on average and are popular for their size, ease of keeping on tracks and ability to be placed in outdoor railroad layouts, such as gardens. The possibilities are endless when it comes to designing railroad layouts, so it's easy to see how the hobby appeals to those who are imaginative.

"It was really hard not to go crazy when I saw all the beautiful trains and people and miniature houses," says Stewart. "It was a friend of mine who found what became my first LGB (Lehmann Gross Bahn) train and cars at a garage sale."

Club member Mike Murray improved upon her layout, and helped lay the track and build the trestles — a job that took about 30 hours.

A few friends also assisted with painting the houses and people, and decorating her garden railway. Stewart, an avid gardener, beautifully landscaped her railway with dwarf trees and carefully pruned plants and ground cover.

Surprisingly, she was able to keep this enormous project a secret from her family until its unveiling.

"They all thought I was putting in a pool or a hot tub," laughs Stewart. "They were very surprised and thrilled to find out I had built a railroad."

Stewart's railroad has grown since then. She now has roughly 200 feet of track on two separate railways and five engines. She can run four trains at the same time. Stewart has added more houses, and dwarf spruce trees surround a rock mountain that's complete with a log cabin and lake. Stewart's dog, Jimmy Carter, likes to drink out of the lake, and occasionally knocks over a few people in the farms and town.

"I'm missing the farmer's wife. It's the town scandal. We don't know if the dog took her or if she ran away on the train," she laughs. "And Jimmy Carter isn't talking."

Stewart also has imaginative stories to go with each building, and even has friends and family living in certain homes in the town of Bliss. Her husband is the town librarian, and is currently running for mayor.

"It's therapeutic for me," smiles Stewart. "I come outside and read a book as the train goes by. I also entertain friends out here. I'd like to eventually get lights in the buildings so I can run it at night."

"It's like a lot of hobbies," she continues. "Once you get into it you have to keep going with it; changing things and adding things. It's a big part of my life now. You can really get lost in it."

She eventually plans to add a fairy village, and work on getting more dwarf plants to match the train scale.

A big part of Stewart's joy in this hobby has been sharing it with family and friends. She's held a few open houses and has invited neighbors, members of her club and other groups she's involved with to visit the railway.

"They say, 'It's magical! It's awesome, I've never seen anything like it.' This is music to my ears because the best part of this little secret hideaway is sharing it with family, friends and garden groups," she said.

(Contact Yovanna Bieberich at yovanna.bieberich@gmail.com)

Copyright © 2013 PressDemocrat.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.