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Naperville Living: Homeowner builds model railroad in basement

By Angela Bender

For The Sun

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For some, hobbies become passions, consuming every waking moment — a way to demonstrate creativity and fulfill dreams. That is exactly what happened to Bob Rogers when he was introduced to the world of model railroads.

“I’d be working on it until four in the morning,” said Rogers, of the model railroad he built 10 years ago in his Naperville home. “It was very exciting, and I didn’t want to stop working.”

Rogers was inspired to create his own railroad after visiting a former colleague’s home in San Diego. That friend had an outdoor version of the LGB, the most popular garden railway model in Europe.

“When I saw that, my wheels started turning,” said Rogers, who had never been particularly interested in trains as a child. “And I said I’d love to have something like that.”

Rogers purchased a building kit and a train, and put the tracks around his Christmas tree and throughout his main floor. He then brought it down to the basement where he set it up on the floor. But, he dreamed of something more exciting. His vision was not necessarily about the trains, but to have a display that would be beautiful even when no trains were running. So he had a 200-by-50-foot platform built in his basement so that he could create an entire scenic landscape.

“There’s a lot going on without the trains,” said Rogers, who is a retired high school band director and semi-retired business owner.

He wanted to create a European setting, blending buildings and scenery seen throughout Europe, to create a village and countryside. On the walls is a background that includes actual buildings in Lucerne, Switzerland. A large custom-made Neuschwanstein Castle, the same one that Walt Disney used for inspiration to create Sleeping Beauty’s castle, is the centerpiece.

Rogers used kits to create many of the other buildings, like the train station and water wheel. He would complete a building and then move on to the next, buying the kits from catalogs when he saw something that he felt would make a nice addition to the layout.

“I still get a lot of enjoyment just coming down to see it without ... playing with the trains,” Rogers said. “For me, individual attention to detail is critical. My thing is, if you really took the time, you’d see so many individual things.”

Things like a bear hiding behind a tree with her cub, hikers, flowers, pigeons and skiers on the Matterhorn. There are laborers, a person reading the newspaper and a couple walking into the church to get married.

And then there are the trains, beginning with two main lines with three sets of tracks. A commuter station connects cable cars and goes underground to a railway station. A sightseeing train is the center point of the layout running from Lucerne. The mining train takes workers to the mountains and also brings people skiing.

Though Rogers says that the model railroad is still a work in progress (he would like to add a lake, more landscaping and lights for a nighttime setting), he feels he is done for now. The entire project consumed two years of his life. At the time, Rogers's fiancée Heidi Martina was very tolerant of the time it took.

“He would work for hours and hours,” Martina said. “I stuck it out. I’d go shopping.”

But Rogers decided to step away from it, and is looking forward to his August wedding with Martina and spending time in their Chicago condo. He says he even would consider selling the model railroad and landscape.

“I got into it like I get into everything else,” Rogers said. “It started consuming my life. I like using the imagination because it helps you create things that were never possible.”

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