

Train gardens capture wonder of Christmas

By Evan Ponton

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Whether winding through snow-capped mountains, a 1950s-era city block or just tracing a loop around the family tree, model trains annually transport Baltimore families and churches into a Christmas state of mind.

Father Michael Carrion, pastor of Immaculate Heart of Mary in Baynesville, still pulls out the trains, trolleys and ceramic houses his father bought more than 60 years ago. His collection now includes more than 150 lighted buildings and features such local landmarks as the Thomas Point Lighthouse and Baltimore's Washington monument. Father Carrion's favorite piece is the Bromo-Seltzer tower, "because it was where my mother used to work, and it always brings to mind Christmas when everyone was together."

After hours of setting track and scenery, the set is ready to display in the parish center where families can chat and watch the trains while sipping hot chocolate and cider after Mass.

"Christmastime can be hectic or stressful," Father Carrion said, "and trains set apart a place to pause and remember the real joy of Christmas: Christ and family."

On the other side of town, just down the hall from the historic Our Lady of the Angels Chapel in Catonsville is the Charlestown Retirement Community's Model Railroad Club, which welcomed more than 1,200 visitors last year. Over the club's 20-year history, nearly 200 men and women of all ages have contributed their time and talents to the exhibit.

Gary Papritz, who now co-leads the group he joined seven years ago, recalls one member who recreated the trolley that he and his wife took on their first date almost 60 years earlier.

Members such as Charlestown resident and retired civil engineer John Jarboe enjoy showing their grandchildren models of the same B & O Railroad their own parents and grandparents worked on while they were growing up.

Children and school groups can enjoy a scavenger hunt for unique items like a Ravens railcar, hobo camp and a "gandy dancer." The festive arrangement attracts many visitors during the Christmas season, but the Charlestown trains are open to the public year round every Saturday noon until 2 p.m.

Trains conjure feelings of nostalgic warmth and simplicity, but enthusiasts say the real magic is how model trains travel through time. Especially during Christmas, railroads tie families together and bridge generations through the sharing of

traditions and stories, turning area homes and churches into destinations of joy and peace.

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