

Kentucky.com

Family working on the railroad store because son has passion for trains

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Posted: 7:05am on Apr 23, 2012; Modified: 11:03am on Apr 27, 2012



Henry Webb, 3, played with wooden trains at Berkshire Trains recently. Henry, says his father, Brad Webb, is a serious train enthusiast. VICKY BROADUS — Herald-Leader

One reason to become the owner of a small business is because you can't bear to see a place you've grown attached to close its doors.

Longtime customers David and Carla Stephanski decided to buy Lexington model-train business Berkshire Trains when its future looked in peril. They had come to rely on the shop because their middle son has autism; trains have gripped his attention from an early age like nothing else.

"The sign said 'Death in the family,' with a phone number at the bottom," says David Stephanski. "After we left, I told my wife, 'I've got a funny feeling,' so we drove back and called the number."

It was the owner, Burt Brashear, who had died. His daughter, an only child, wasn't going to be able to keep the store. But the Stephanskis didn't want to lose the shop. For their son Chris, trains were what life was all about, and Berkshire Trains was a place that felt the same way. The couple bought the business in 2006, seeing it partly as an investment in his future.

After spending several years on Southland Drive, Berkshire Trains recently moved to a brightly painted 100-year-old building on West Third Street. Carla Stephanski and their oldest son, Alex, work there during the week; David, who has an information technology job with the state, works on weekends; and Chris, now 16 and a student at Woodford County High School, is there every weekend and during vacations, watching train videos, helping out in the workshop and talking railroad history with customers.

Customers who visited the shop's Southland Drive shop, with party rooms, a theater and a ride-on Thomas the Tank Engine train, will find a vastly scaled-down operation on Third Street. The couple has a lease-to-own agreement and is still settling in. Eventually, David Stephanski says, there'll be a bigger model layout. For now, there are Thomas and Chuggington tracks for younger kids, and an O-scale display with R.J. Corman boxcars by the counter. O-scale is one of the more common model sizes, which range from Z-scale, or as some call it, "magnifying-glass scale," to HO — the world's most popular — to G, for garden scale. The shop stocks most of them and can get the rest.

The Stephanskis like the feel of the building. "We set this up so it would have an old-store style and look," David says.

'He'll just go and go'

Chris Stephanski became fixated on trains very early, his father says.

"Our oldest boy, Alex, used to play with Brio trains. When Chris decided to play with toys, that's what he played with," says David Stephanski. "He became fascinated with Thomas the Tank Engine stories and watched them over and over."

Now Chris, whom his father describes as high-functioning autistic, can look through a book on trains and instantly identify any picture. Opening one called *Engines of America*: "That's a steam locomotive that ran on the Boston and Maine Railroad. They called this engine the 4-6-2 and named the engine Pacific," says Chris. "And this engine is called a 4-4-0. It was one of the first to pull trains across the West." The numbers refer to wheel arrangement; a 4-6-2 has two leading axles — or four wheels — three driving axles and one trailing axle. The Berkshire engine, the store's namesake, is a 2-8-4.

"You can pull out a stack of vintage postcards and he'll just go and go," says his father. "People at the train shows are blown away by how much he knows."

David Stephanski had a Lionel train set as a kid, but trains were never a consuming passion as they are for Chris and many of his customers. He's just always been good at fixing things. "I can fix about anything mechanical or electronic. It just comes naturally," David says. "I don't need manuals. I kind of have a photographic memory, so when I take it apart, it's catalogued so I put it back in that order."

Much of his time in the shop is spent repairing customers' trains and cleaning old ones he has bought for resale. He's been to model-train repair school and is certified by train companies Lionel and Mike's Train House.

"When you think about your offspring, you look at the attributes they have, and you know there are ones they picked up from you. So Chris can fix stuff, too; you can just hand him a train, and he can fix it," Stephanski says.

The stuff of dreams

Some of Berkshire Trains' customers have experienced railroad work firsthand. Jack Riley stops by most Saturdays just to see what's happening. "I used to be a brakeman on the old Southern line," Riley says. "Everybody's got their vices. Some people like to go to bars; I like to come here," he says. Riley collects some trains but doesn't have a layout set up — yet. The magazine rack is a good place to imagine the possibilities and, in his case, reminisce.

Another Berkshire customer, James Brown of Brown's Bakery, got his first Lionel Jesse James Express when he was 12 and built a city around it he named Jamestown. Still hooked on the hobby 30 years later, he says model train layouts help people live out their dreams.

"My wife told me she'd always wanted a Jaguar," and now she has one — in HO scale.

Once he starts talking trains, he can go and go, too. "There are the (digital) engines now that have the sound of authentic air brakes and squeal just like the real thing," he says. Digital engines, unlike the traditional models, receive power commands from a chip embedded in the engine, giving operators more options.

Brown says that as his son has gotten older, he has lost interest in trains to other hobbies. It's further evidence that model train stores have become a dwindling breed in the age of video games. It's easy for any discussion of the hobby to lapse into a kind of nostalgia that prompts old-timers to eulogize their own youth and deplore the current state of children's playtime: the lack of opportunities to first imagine, and then build with their own hands.

But most kids have never ridden a real train, or felt the blast of wind and noise as they pass from one car to another, or fallen asleep to the rhythm of the rails. Some have never seen a train roar by or heard the lonesome whistle call. It's not surprising that model trains don't capture youthful imaginations to the extent they used to. But Thomas might be the little engine that could bring a lifelong love of trains to many boys and girls.

In Lexington, there are plenty of chances to hear freight trains and feel the ground rumble as they pass. Riley, the former brakeman, says the guys on the old Southern line used to hope they'd be stopped in their automobiles at railroad crossings, because even when they weren't working on trains, they liked to watch them go by. It's a feeling Chris Stephanski and train lovers young and old everywhere can relate to.