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Train lovers await Whistlestop Weekend

For 25 years, Dr. Jack Fisher has looked forward to the Adventure Science Center's annual Whistlestop Weekend, an event highlighting model trains.

A self-professed train junkie, Fisher, a plastic surgeon and associate clinical professor of plastic surgery at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, says he was drawn to the event almost immediately.

"It started as a family tradition with my wife and I bringing our two young sons, now 29 and 26 years old, out to the event," said Fisher, a Forest Hills resident. "I was 8 weeks old when I got my first train set. Actually, I was my father's excuse to get trains."

Fisher, 64, is one of the sponsors of this year's Whistlestop Weekend, set to begin Friday and run through Sunday. He also plans to be at the event to run some of the trains, a responsibility he's more than familiar with.

Known as the chief train engineer at Vanderbilt, Fisher is credited with helping to build the model train at the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt. It was a project, he says, that was one of the most fun and rewarding he's ever undertaken. A plaque bears his name in

the hospital lobby.

"Even now, I'll be in the operating room and get emergency calls saying there's been a derailment or a wreck," he said with a chuckle. "When I'm done operating, I deal with the wreck."

At Whistlestop Weekend, every scale and size model train is demonstrated, including the O-gauge, which Fisher says was used in creating the children's hospital train.

In all, eight different layouts in seven different operating scales will be available for viewing this weekend. The scales range from garden sized, described as the largest scale with one inch equaling 24 inches, to z-gauge, the smallest with one inch equaling 220 inches.

"Z-gauge is tiny," said Larry Dunlap-Berg, educator for community engagement at the Adventure Science Center. "It can operate out of a briefcase."

Train enthusiasts from two clubs, the

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Cumberland Valley Model Railroaders and Nashville Ntrak, will be on hand to run the models and share their expertise about trains.

All ages involved

Guests can participate in a variety of transportation-themed activities, such as experimenting with hovercrafts, CO2-powered cars and train costumes.

“The thing that fascinates me the most with Whistlestop is watching the people,” said Dunlap-Berg, who has been involved with the event for about 22 years. “I love seeing that senior citizen who is 80-90 years old all of a sudden become a 20-year-old again, and I love seeing the children who are 3 and 4 years old all of a sudden walk in and become the CEOs. There is a great transfer of age that happens every year. The adults become the kids and the kids become adults.”

During Whistlestop weekend, 3,000-4,000 guests are expected at the center. The first 250 visitors on Saturday will receive commemorative Whistlestop bandanas.

According to Dunlap-Berg, one reason Whistlestop Weekend is held is to honor the history of the Adventure Science Center. In the 1950s, the center was called the Nashville Children’s Museum, and there was a model train exhibit set up there.

“A lot of the adults who come to see Whistlestop Weekend remember that original layout at the museum,” he said.

Whistlestop Weekend wraps up on Sunday, but the Adventure Science Center will keep its exhibit open through Jan. 1. Warren Hannas, Whistlestop Weekend’s chief engineer, has operated the center’s model train exhibit since the event’s inception.

“My favorite thing is keeping the trains going,” said Hannas, who is usually at the center from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily from November through January. “I have established parameters for operating the trains. I require they run no more than an hour at a time to prolong the life of these little locomotives. I love to chat with the people. In 25 years, I’ve talked to people from all over the world who come in and visit with us.”

At his Thompson’s Station home, Hannas has about 100 locomotives and other train equipment. He also has a layout in his basement. It’s used for testing the trains before they’re brought to the center.

“I believe that a love of trains is a genetic thing,” said Hannas, 87. “My grandfather

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worked for Pennsylvania Railroad as a bridge builder. I have always looked at some of the bridges that remain from that era and thought, 'I wonder if granddaddy worked on that one?.' ”

Contact Nicole Young at or nyoung@tennessean.com.



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Recently, Larry Stone and Tick Bryan were trying to avoid the noise of a train in Lebanon. Trains are the theme of Whistlestop Weekend, an event for all ages of train lovers at Adventure Science Center. / Larry McCormack / The Tennessean

IF YOU GO

Whistlestop Weekend

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday and 12:30-5:30 p.m. Sunday

Cost: \$12 for adults and \$10 for children ages 2-12 and seniors 65 and older. Certified Tennessee teachers with school ID are free.

Special events

11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday: Conductor Jack of the Zinghoppers will host special sing-along performances.

2:30 p.m. on Saturday: Ed Cole, executive director of The Transit Alliance of Middle Tennessee, will present his lecture, "Trains and Mass Transit: New Technologies that Provide New Transportation Choices in Our Future."

More information: www.adventuresci.com

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