

# All Aboard!

New Jersey's Northlandz Railroad Museum holds the world's largest model train

BY KURT SMITH



**T**he Northlandz Railroad Museum in Flemington, NJ is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's largest model railroad. Bruce Williams Zaccagnino's creation is now the beneficiary of new ownership, an expensive makeover, and finally, the marketing respect it richly deserves.

Julie Parker's occupation was to tell people about businesses worth visiting in Flemington.

And she had never heard of Northlandz.

That's roughly the equivalent of being in charge of Philadelphia tourism, and not being

aware of Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, the Art Museum, and the Reading Terminal Market.

It wasn't Parker's fault, though. The genius behind Northlandz is an excessively modest man, who cared more about creating his art than promoting it.

She fondly remembers meeting him.

"I was doing the Flemington Information Center. Somebody told me, you've got to go see Bruce Williams, he just opened this place called Northlandz. I said, okay, maybe I can promote him. I had a group of businesses that would pay me and I would promote them all



Photos by Kurt Smith





ness looking for a storage warehouse, and came upon a large gray building off Route 202 that might work.

"We drove past it so many times. I never knew what it was. Our real estate guy said, if you don't like what's inside, you can always demolish it."

As Sohail describes his reaction to seeing what was inside, Parker chuckles, as if fully appreciating the astonishment factor.

"We started going through the whole tour," Sohail continues. "We were like, in our life-

time, nobody has ever built something like this. We've traveled throughout the world, we've never seen anything like this.

"So we decided to take a risk and invest into it and promote it."

That they've done. Northlandz needed work, to be sure...read reviews from a few years ago and you'll see a lot about the state of disrepair it was in. Sohail and his partners have thus far poured several hundred thousand dollars into cleaning it up, and the results are nothing short of remarkable.

You could literally spend hours in one spot, watching a toy locomotive charmingly meander through a perfectly scaled-down neighborhood.

"There are people that came three or four years ago and they say, we can't believe the difference," Parker says proudly.

The new ownership has a larger vision for Northlandz too...it includes shuttle buses from New York City, a hotel, a banquet hall, and much more. All revolving around a toy train set.

That said, it is one truly amazeballs train set.

Northlandz is, simply put for brevity, the world's largest model railroad, according to the Guinness folks who are experts on such



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things. It spans over 45,000 square feet and 16 acres. The walkway just to go through it is over a mile.

To give you an idea of just how staggering its size, this observer had taken over a hundred pictures before reaching a sign that reads: "You are now 25% through Northlandz".

Every moment is sheer model railroad wonderment. Huge displays filled with mountains and bridges, offering backdrops to bucolic still life of homes, factories, rivers, and neighborhoods. There's "Iron Valley", with its multiple iron bridges gracefully leading through mountain tunnels. There's "Joycetown," with churches, homes, and model trucks decorated with staples of American commerce like Kodak, Dollar Tree and Valvoline. There's a fully detailed city mockup featuring an aircraft carrier. And a display of mountain life with busy railroads throughout that literally occupies three floors of the building. Tunnels? Northlandz features over four hundred of them.

On and on and on.

**A**NY ONE OF THESE DISPLAYS could be the highlight of nearly any museum in the country. You could literally spend hours in one spot, watching a toy locomotive charmingly meander through a perfectly scaled-down neighborhood.

And this marvel was nearly all built by just one person.

Sohail estimates that Zaccagnino spent 17-19 hours daily, seven days a week, for close to four years building a miniature world. As one can imagine, he received little to no support from family members...as if spending eight hours a day and five days a week in a cubicle somehow makes more sense. According to Sohail, only Bruce's wife Jean always supported the venture.

You could probably be forgiven for thinking your neighbor was crazy for devoting even sleeping hours to building a model railroad.

Then you see the finished work, and you realize crazy people are awesome.

"You won't believe your eyes" is Northlandz's slogan, and despite seeing it every day... Parker is currently the Northlandz Marketing and PR Director...she repeats those words herself often, with genuine passion that every employee shares.

"I just feel it's magical," she gushes. "How can somebody have conceived this? It's incredible. You go through it and you start seeing all these little trains going in the little villages and the different themes and the different venues."

"Everything is built by hand," Sohail adds. "He told us one of the bridges that he built is



## The Man Who Built It

**Bruce Williams Zaccagnino** got started in the same place most all model railroad enthusiasts do: in his basement. More correctly, in a basement of a house that was being constructed, according to the Northlandz website. The construction workers would leave for the day, and he would build mountains and tracks in his new basement.

Like today, nearly everyone who saw his work was quite impressed, to the point where he would open it for the public on weekends. He purchased the land on Route 202 as the popularity grew, and the rest is history.

Zaccagnino was no stranger to artistry, incidentally. He made a decent amount of money in the video game industry, including winning several awards as a developer/designer. He was, according to Sohail, quite the accomplished musician as well. "I watched him play the organs that we have over here. I never saw anybody play that well."

But Northlandz was his passion, obviously. To the point where he spent his time building his dream, rather than marketing it. Sohail compliments his modesty but expresses regret that his people didn't meet him sooner.

"We would have promoted this throughout the world," he says.

"He's been interviewed with CNN and Fox, all the major, you know, and he never made a big deal out of that. He's in the Guinness world records, this place, and he never even promoted that fact. We saw the certificate, it's sitting on the exhibit and anybody could take it."

"Bruce didn't really advertise; he let itself advertise," says Ken Vogel. "The point was, it was a guy who had a dream about building a great layout and actually pulled it off. The dream is accomplished."

Zaccagnino is retired now...traveling, according to Julie Parker, so one guesses he's actually riding trains instead of building them. But he's appreciative that his art is going to live on.

"I think he was starting to see that a lot of stuff was falling apart," Sohail reflects. "He had a feeling like if somebody doesn't save it, it's going to go away. When we bought it and we started repairing it and cleaning up and everything, he was very happy, you know, my art is being preserved."

"He said, this is my gift to the world."

40 foot long, 23,000 small wood pieces, that he put together one by one by one by hand."

Ask anyone working at Northlandz what the appeal of a huge model train set is, and you'll get a different answer.

Parker thinks it's the glimpse of history.

"I think it goes back to the industrial revolution. Trains made our country great. They transported everything. Food, industry, it's

like the backbone of our economy. Buses, trains and cars, they're what makes the economy tick."

Sohail believes the appeal reaches us on multiple levels. He refers to young people who come to work at Northlandz and help with the layouts out of pure passion.

"Within the train layout, you have to have more than one skill. It's architecture, it's engi-





neering, it's electrical, it's design, it's scenery. Basically doing one hobby, you're learning all different skills."

Ken Vogel, a train technician, generously took time to point out multiple intricacies of Northlandz during this interview. He remembers his own days of building model trains, and bringing one of his fellow hobbyists to Northlandz for the first time.

"Bruce signed a box car that we brought here from my nephew. What I said to him at that time was, I know a lot of people that are remodelers who always wanted to build an empire and never did it. I said, you're the only one that did."

Sohail thinks the moving train gives life to a piece of art. "You're looking at something beautiful going up and down, and all of a sudden the train comes."

Worth putting over \$300,000 into preserving? No question for Sohail. "Every time I come, it excites me as well, even when I own it. I see the people coming out of the place and I see how big the smiles on their faces and how happy they are to see it.

"That's made me happy."

Walking through the magical railroad empire that is Northlandz, one gets a sense of needing to be of advanced age to fully appreciate the endeavor. The longer you've spent on Planet Earth, the longer you've gone without witnessing anything like it.

But even this observer's little ones can't wait to go back. ■

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