

HMAVIEWPOINT

A meeting of the minds.



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In a recent interview, Stacey Walthers Naffah of Wm. K. Walthers Inc. suggested that the model railroad industry attract a younger audience by meeting on common ground, like through technology. HMA Model Railroad Industry Council President Gale Cousins, head of Märklin's North America division, echoed similar thoughts in December as families crowded the floor of the Oklahoma City Train Show. That's sound thinking in an age when most young people are attached at the thumbs to some sort of digital device.

Such is the case with my buddy's 13-year-old son, Caleb, who visits every other weekend. Caleb is like many of us who fell in love at that age with a model car, train, boat or airplane. Only he pursued his passion with Hot Wheels online, mostly because no brick and mortar hobby shops are near his home and, well, that's what kids do these days. Caleb is building a diorama for his Hot Wheels cars in same way that model railroaders build scenic layouts. But he's learning from YouTube videos, not by tips from seasoned modelers.

He shares a deep interest in cars with his dad, Sean, who has a nice muscle car sitting in the garage. But Sean isn't a modeler, so he's careful about offering advice. On the few occasions that Caleb and I have talked, he showed only passing interest when I mentioned techniques from 40-plus years of modeling. But he was quick to show me a YouTube video about things he'd learned, and I tried to be encouraging. Sean always mentions progress on Caleb's diorama when we're together, and I encouraged him to take Caleb to any one of several hobby shops in Dallas/Fort Worth so his son could gain a greater perspective. They never could get around to it.

At one point, it felt pointless to offer Caleb any more help. It seems the only common ground we have is that we're building models. In my train room are two layouts under construction: the Northwest Tarrant & Pacific, an HO-scale, DCC shelf layout that has been featured in the last four issues of Cowcatcher Magazine, and the much larger N-scale Whitehurst & Pine Ridge Railroad. Sean sensed one afternoon that I was frustrated that Caleb wasn't that interested. "I can't tell him what to do," Sean said. "He does what he wants to do." A few days later Sean asked if he could bring Caleb along some Saturday afternoon when I opened up the room to friends. It was a breakthrough moment. Caleb immediately focused on the NT&P, which is nearly finished. He looked up and down the layout at the structures and scenery as I conversed with the adults. But Caleb had lots of questions. He asked how I built trees, planted grass and constructed roads. I showed him my workbench and the mounds of supplies beneath (after four decades you can imagine what that looks like). He sat there for 15 minutes just gazing in wonder. "He'll do that," Sean said. "He'll look through my toolbox for hours."

Before he left, I stuck a throttle in Caleb's hand and he ran a train and even switched two industries. He was intrigued by the locomotive sounds, and together we blew two crossings. Getting the two longs, a short and a long on the horn was difficult at first as his timing was off. No problem. Afterward, he agreed with his dad that the Hot Wheels diorama needed an abandoned railroad track. We talked about the paints and materials he could use to create an overgrown track next to a road. The following Monday his dad took him to one of the hobby shops I suggested. There he bought a bunch of supplies with his Christmas money. I doubt Caleb gets interested in model railroading any time soon, and I'm really curious if that abandoned track gets built. But that's okay. At some point, he may tire of static vehicles and want to see a train run over his handiwork.

What he builds doesn't matter to me. What does is that his interest in his hobby was reaffirmed and maybe he'll make modeling a lifetime passion. Seeing is believing, and Caleb saw the possibilities by example. And, meeting in the middle doesn't always have to be through technology. It can be exposing today's youth – or adults – firsthand to hobbies. I cringe every time I see "Do Not Touch" signs around layouts at shows, or a dealer paying only slight attention to a young customer. Putting throttles or controllers in hands sells. So does sharing experiences. Sometimes it's just a matter of finding that common ground. **HM**



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