

Autistic learners recreate enthusiast's 'treasured' model railway

Neurodivergent learners from Autism Unlimited's Futures programme in Christchurch have created their own model railway from a layout gifted by the bereaved family of a local railway enthusiast.

Futures, operated by leading charity Autism Unlimited, empowers neurodiverse people aged 18-25 to fulfil their potential and become active in their local communities through learning, practical activities, work placements, employability skills and supported independent living experiences.

Futures Manager Tilly Larment explained: "Our learners, some of whom absolutely adore anything to do with railways, decided they wanted to build their own model railway here at our base in Manor Road. I went online and found a layout which was previously owned by a gentleman called Barry Grace, from Parkstone in Poole. Barry had sadly passed away and his friend Tim Drew was advertising the layout on behalf of Barry's wife, Sue, who wanted it to go to a true railway enthusiast. She and her family were very pleased when I told them who we are, what we do and what our learners were trying to create, and she said Barry would have been very happy too."

Tim Drew and Barry Grace were fellow members of the South Western Model Railway Club.

Tim added: "Since Barry's sad passing from cancer three years ago, Sue has been eager to find good homes for some of his beautiful collection of trains and layouts. She was thrilled when she heard Futures wanted the layout because she and Barry have a grandchild who is autistic."

Barry hand built the layout now owned by Futures. It was based on the Cornish landscape where he grew up.

Tim continued: "I know Sue is hoping to come along, meet some of the learners and see what they have done with the layout."

"We at the South Western Model Railway Club also hope to host the learners at some point and help them with their layout any way we can going forward. It's been a chance meeting, but perfect in a lot of ways."

Futures has also received donations for its layout of unwanted wood from Hope Roofing and a large box of engines and other items from a lady called Tracy Wilson.

"People have been very generous," said Tilly.

"All this, together with engines donated by the learners themselves – and many hours of hard work – now means we have an impressive model railway with buildings and bridges and stations which can be adapted, changed and generally enjoyed by everyone. We are all very excited to see it grow and entertain many more learners to come."

From an initial four learners in 2021 Futures has grown to 28 learners, all of whom are reaching their goals.

The programme won a Certificate of Excellence in the Pearson National Teaching Awards 2024.

Amanda, who attends Futures, said: "It's been fun to create the railway, design our own parts and then change them to keep it interesting."

Tyler agreed: “We can all get involved. It’s looking good, but we could always do with more engines if anyone has any engines they don’t want, as well as some more tiny people and animals to create new landscapes.”

If you can help with any suitable donations, please email Tilly Larment at:
tilly.larment@autism-unlimited.org

Autism Unlimited is now accepting new applications for Futures.

For more details contact email: futures@autism-unlimited.org or phone: 01202 485305.

Picture captions: Futures learners Amanda (left) and Tyler are some of the students enjoying the train layout.

Ends

