

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

The beloved train that could

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It's one of the first sounds you hear when you walk into Festival of Trees — the whistle, faint but distinct. Then you see it: the bright engine, lights twinkling and the faces of children pressed against the railing of the viewing platform, eyes wide with wonder.

The Festival Express has been circling joy since 1997. IMEG (then KJWW) began engineering the model train display a few years later, around 2000, when CEO Paul Vanduyne and his colleagues took the project under their wing.

The story, though, begins long before the track was ever laid. Vanduyne started collecting model trains when his son was born. Over time, the collection grew — taking up more space than he expected. His close friend, the late Karen Getz, encouraged him to share that passion with the community. Together, they imagined a miniature world that would live inside Festival of Trees.

When IMEG's engineers volunteered to bring it to life, the Festival Express became more than a display — it moved. Built after hours by local engineers donating their expertise, the tiny railway became a marvel of precision and care. Each bridge, tunnel and storefront was handcrafted to mirror real life, right down to the working lights and synchronized sounds.

What began as one man's hobby soon became both a festival fixture and an internal tradition at IMEG. Each year, departments and committees collaborate — designing layouts, repairing engines, adding new touches that mirror their day jobs in innovation, design and teamwork.

"Every detail is considered with the same thoughtful intention as our real projects," said Erin Duffy, who helps coordinate the volunteer effort alongside Molly Foley and others. "It's joyful work that reminds us what engineering can do when it's driven by heart."

For children, it's pure wonder — watching the train chug through tunnels and past glowing storefronts, eyes following every loop. Years ago, while volunteering at the display, Duffy overheard a young boy exclaim, "This is the best day of my life." She's carried that line ever since. Proof that the smallest experiences can create the biggest memories.

The Quad-City Times has chronicled this magic for decades — from early write-ups announcing the Festival Express debut to features celebrating IMEG's continued sponsorship. The story never really changes: The train keeps rolling, the kids keep smiling and the community keeps showing up.



That consistency is the quiet brilliance behind it. IMEG's engineers donate time, tools and ingenuity — not for branding, but for belonging. Their ongoing stewardship makes the Festival Express more than an attraction; it's part of the region's cultural DNA.

And that's exactly what The Cultural Trust exists to protect — the partnerships, traditions and acts of generosity that remind us who we are. Culture isn't only what hangs in museums or plays on stages. Sometimes it hums softly on a four-foot track at the heart of a holiday tradition.

Every community has its landmarks. In the Quad Cities, the landmarks were built along the river and the rails — tracks that carried industry, people and progress. Decades later, one small set of tracks still carries that same spirit.

The Festival Express may move just a few feet off the ground, but it moves something much bigger — the shared reminder that progress can be joyful, and that community is built by people who care enough to keep something beautiful in motion.

Coming tomorrow: Karen's kind of Christmas

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