

Ron Rosen's Universe

After handling stressful marital dispute cases all day, he comes home to his trains



Nothing flips Rosen's switch like old-fashioned Lionels.

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Descend seven steps into the basement of 66-year-old Ron Rosen's home, which is near his West Long Branch office at Chamlin, Rosen, Uliano & Witherington, and you'll discover a town complete with city hall, farms, cows, people, a subway, houses, cars and a hospital, all resting on a multilevel 16-by-18-foot plywood platform, and with trains, the old-fashioned O gauge Lionel models popular from 1945 to 1960, running through it. It took Rosen three years to build his universe and it's been up now for more than 20 years. His children remember the trains the best.

"Working on the trains helped connect us to each other," says his son, Ian, 34, a product manager at Dow Jones. "We learned how to fix things, how to run the various sets and accessories, and would take twice-yearly two-day trips to York, Pennsylvania, for the train convention."

Adds daughter Kira Dabby, 29, a Harvard-educated lawyer now with the Latham & Watkins office in Newark: "The trains created a special bond between my father and me. I used to climb up on the table and dust the roofs of the buildings. Even now I love watching my dad show the train set to family friends—he gets so much enjoyment out of sharing it."

As visitors walk downstairs, Rosen watches their reactions. Lights flash. A sawmill cuts planks from logs. A forklift loads freight cars. It's quite a thing to see.

He also isn't shy about showing off his collection of more than 1,100 wind-up toys. The man does love his toys.

A specialist in matrimonial work, Rosen has seen some pretty ugly disputes, including protracted fights over airline miles and Giants tickets. He even handled a case where a husband refused

to leave the house after a divorce. "Three times we went back to court and received court orders for him to leave," says Rosen. "After six months, the wife figured since he was so determined, he was worth keeping. They remarried and stayed married for 10 more years until he died."

So how has Rosen's universe affected Rosen's marriage? It was his wife, Sandy, who got him started. When she was pregnant with their first child, she wondered aloud whether they should get a set. And he was off.

"I see a hobby as something fun," she says, smiling. "He sees it as a calling."

Rosen will be the first to tell you that divorces rarely proceed smoothly. But in the basement, life is different. There, trains run on time. And when something is derailed, it can easily be set back on track.

—G. Patrick Pawling