

IT TAKES A VILLAGE



Patrick Webb

Hungry Harbor Grille's restaurant manager, Brandy Meisner, was in charge of putting together this year's display, which took two weeks to set up and will take several hours to tear down. It lives year-round in its own storage unit, with many of the buildings and vehicles in their original boxes, ready to be carefully unpacked and laid out for another year.

Hungry Harbor Grille in Long Beach, Wash., brings winter cheer with town display

By PATRICK WEBB
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Dennis Roberts delights in bringing seasonal joy to the Long Beach Peninsula.

The back space at his Hungry Harbor Grille offers a sparkling diorama that draws visitors every year, some from two states away.

It is a brightly lit Christmas village, featuring Peninsula businesses, lighthouses, boats and fairground-type models that fill more than a quarter of the space in his restaurant. Working electric model trains and a trolley provide constant movement to the static display.

"People are amazed," said Roberts, who owns the business on Pacific Avenue, the main street through the center of town, with his wife, Lois.

A web of hidden electrical power strips linked up with a wall timer provides the illumination that makes the display so photogenic.

The miniature village is installed each year in time to be a centerpiece of the Long Beach Christmas At The Beach, a promotion which merchants and the city begin just before Thanksgiving to kick off the holidays.

Despite Christmas being over, the exhibit will stay open for people to enjoy through Thursday, Jan. 31.

Roberts knows customers who make annual trips from Idaho and Montana to enjoy and photograph his display. Some use its image as a background for their personalized family Christmas cards. One woman posted a video online that gained several hundred views.

A growing town

The scale was not planned.

"It started small and just grew and grew," said Roberts, a former real estate broker. "I had four houses and a car in my waiting room. That was 1988. It just grew up from there. Every year it just got bigger."

In the past 10 years, Roberts has made it

a feature of his family restaurant.

He used to construct it personally; now he recruits help. "Different people do it every other year," he said. "They have a different perspective. If I do it all the time, it always looks the same."

He allows his designated designer latitude, "but you can't just put things anywhere." He does have one stipulation: "There's always a church at the top; it's always a focus," he said.

Restaurant manager Brandy Meisner, who helped with much of the smaller parts of the display last year, was assigned the overall design and set-up duty this Christmas.

"It's a labor of love," she beamed, as