

## With help from Pilgrim students, mini wonderland ready for visitors in Gov. Francis Farms



*Cunningham has been displaying his mini village, which started off with five houses, since 1989. Now, he has 210 ceramic pieces in his collection.*

Since 1989, Dan Cunningham has been inviting people to his home so they can take part in the excitement of Christmas, as he sets up a winter wonderland mini village with 210 ceramic houses in his two and a half car garage.

But this year, he didn't arrange it by himself. Fifteen students from Alison Wallace's Urban Sociology class at Pilgrim High School helped.

As part of the course, seniors focus on community service and often participate in food banks and fundraisers. After Cunningham called the school requesting they send students to help him lug boxes out of his garage to make room for the display, the seniors happily offered their assistance. Last month, they began the work.

"What normally takes me three days took them 17 minutes," Cunningham said.

They stopped by to see the village on Monday morning and the display is nearly complete. From there, they will visit nearby schools such as John Brown Francis; Wyman; Hoxsie; Norwood; Randall Holden; and Holliman to let them know about Cunningham's exhibit.

While Cunningham doesn't charge people to view the village, he asks for donations for Ronald McDonald House, a non-profit organization that houses the families of children being treated for serious illnesses at nearby hospitals, as well as A Wish Come True Inc., a foundation that grants wishes for children between the ages of three and 18 who have life-threatening diseases.

In addition, Ryan Agnew, who had a liver transplant a few years ago and received assistance from the Ronald McDonald House, as well as A Wish Come True, will have a signature book at the display.

"It makes you feel good because you played a small part in something big," said Allyson Ancona, 17.

Danielle LeBlanc, 17, agreed and said, "We have a drive to help people out. It's like paying it forward."

Phil Tantimonico, 17, felt the same and said, "It's for a good cause and I'm happy to help."

Chase Gilroy, 17, said he enjoys, "The spirit of giving."

Wallace is proud of her students and is honored to take part in the activity alongside them. She said it shows their characters.

"They're constantly giving back," she said. "A lot of what we do takes place outside of the classroom and they've earned that privilege."

Cunningham said it renews his faith in America's youth. He loved every minute of having them at his home.

"You hear about all the bad things in the world but we have a group of great kids here," he said.

On Friday at 8 a.m., the students will participate in an event to support Cymry's Christmas Wish, a Cranston non-profit corporation that aims to make sure children receive toys for Christmas, in the school auditorium. They will help with the assembly and also perform an interpretation dance mixed with motivational speaking.

For now, they are excited about the display, which includes a moving section made up of an ice rink; trolley; carousel; two trains; as well as ballerinas dancing to the music of the Nutcracker.

Riana Proia, 17, likes the trains best, while Guilja Garcia, 17, enjoys the carousel most.

It also features a variation of sets, such as ones based on art by Norman Rockwell and Currier and Ives; modern Coca Cola houses; and a collection of houses surrounded by ships that represent the Bristol waterfront in England in 1835. In fact, he owns one of two sets in the state.

The village fun began when Cunningham's wife, Sandy, bought him five ceramic houses for Christmas. From there, he began collecting.



*Chase Gilroy, 17, shows off one of the model trains. He said he enjoys, "The spirit of giving."*



*Fifteen students from Alison Wallace's Urban Sociology class at Pilgrim High School helped Warwick resident Dan Cunningham (right) set up a mini village with 210 ceramic houses in his two and a half car garage. As part of the course, seniors focus on community service. They stand with Cunningham's son Michael, (left) Wallace, (second from left) and Cunningham.*

At first, he set up the handful of houses in his basement in the home he shared with his family in Cranston. It wasn't long before it got bigger and he decided to share it with the public.

"We started with a server and a 4 by 4 table," said Cunningham's son, Michael. "He does it for the kids just to see the expressions on their faces."

Beginning on Saturday night and running through Jan. 8, visitors are welcome to stop by Cunningham's home at 270 Squantum Drive in Governor Francis Farms from 5 to 9 p.m. Santa will appear on Saturday nights.

In addition, Cunningham, who is on the board of directors at the Ronald McDonald House and also serves as a District Governor for the Lions Club, will be at Dave's Bar on Grill on Sunday for Breakfast with Santa. The event will begin at 9 a.m.

Story and Photos by: Jessica Botelho