

# The Polar Bear Express chugs away in Bristol

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Gloria Keenan stood akimbo in the grass with her late husband, Thomas Keenan. The pair was sizing up their acreage, speculating if a newly acquired 1950s "Century Flyer" 24-gauge amusement park train and track would fit. A third of the size of a real locomotive, but substantial nonetheless, the train was loaded up onto a logging truck by Thomas and transported to Bristol in hopes of providing some backyard entertainment for their grandchildren. Gloria pointed out the landscape's challenges — a ravine and a hill — to which he calmly replied that he would build a trestle.

"He was an amazing man," states Gloria fondly. "He had travel logs and wrote books, and he did everything he wanted to do by reading and learning."

This month, the train is busy zooming through a life-sized Santa's Village, Polar Bear Mountain, Candyland and light display.

Gloria fell for the quiet, business-minded Thomas as they bonded over their love of travel and trains. He was a retired air force veteran and she had spent most of her career as an administrative aide for a legal publishing firm before going into marketing as a salesperson. Once she retired, Gloria continued working with families and children who lacked access to recreation as an administrator, and also served on the Liberty County's Arts Council.

Both wanted to find a way to give back to their community, and as they debated what to do with their new train set, the idea for the Veterans Memorial Railroad was born. In 2001, they were given permission by the Liberty County Board of Commissioners to use part of the newly constructed Veterans Memorial Park to build Thomas' vision. Liberty County, known primarily for its fishing and hunting tourism, suddenly had a new cultural attraction.

"We realized then that we had something families could enjoy and do together," recalls Gloria, who watched attendance and interest blossom, especially when the trains transformed for the holidays into "The Polar Bear Express."

Originally born in Quincy, Gloria grew up in New York City, though she always looked forward to taking the train back to Florida with her mother and sister, before eventually moving back to her home state as a teenager. Speeding on the Silver Meteor from Pennsylvania Station to Jacksonville, her affinity for trains grew from the time she was 8 years old.

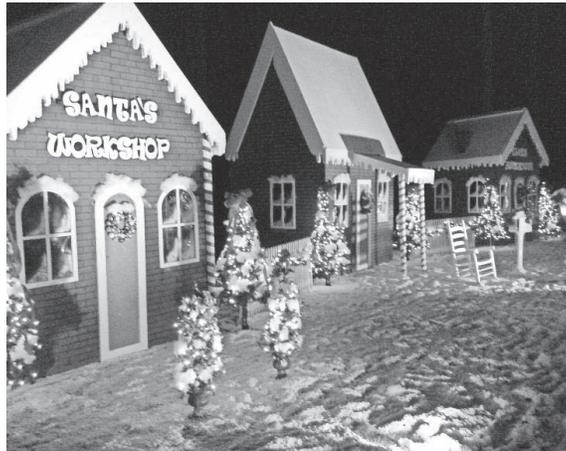
"I loved to go sit in the dining car to have lunch," says Gloria. "Everything was so upscale at that time with tablecloths and the servers all dressed up. I just felt like a princess."

Wanting to provide a similar feeling to local children, the Keenans continued to grow their fleet. Thomas bought a refurbished, coal-fire steam train in Boca Raton, and braved a blizzard in Chicago to bring back their "No. 59" steam train replica. In 2007, they received a grant from the Federal Highway Enhancement Fund to expand the track to keep up with demand.

Gloria can remember her husband working tirelessly to draw up the plans for the track expansion, the 2,600 square foot train depot modeled after the St. Charles depot in Missouri, the museum, the maintenance building and workshop, the water tower for the steam engine, a playground and gazebo, a paved trail with lights, and of course, the trestle he had originally envisioned.



Gloria Keenan and her late husband Thomas Keening with their amusement park train in Bristol. COURTESY OF GLORIA KEENAN



The village scenery on Veterans Memorial Railroad's The Polar Bear Express in Bristol. MELISSA DURHAM.

"The trestle is hidden by shrubs and trees so you don't see it when you first come into the park," says Gloria. "To top it off, he put a bridge off the walking trail through the cypress swamp that winds close to the train tracks. From the bridge you can see where the cows are grazing through the trees. It's just a very small piece of Florida right there that's been untouched and you can walk through."

Labor was made possible with the aid of the Liberty Correctional Institution, the Liberty County Road Department, and the C. W. Roberts Construction Company of Hosford, in addition to an outpouring of support from local volunteers. While Thomas sat in the conductor's seat, Gloria provided school trips and visitors with educational programming on the unique history of each train.

A caboose sporting the phrase "Freedom is Not Free," honors the troops of the armed forces and represents the heart of the Veterans Memorial Railroad

— not only to preserve these trains, but to provide a space for families to come together for a one-of-a-kind experience.

"My husband said what made him so happy was when he would engineer the red, white, and blue train, look back, and see those smiling faces," says Gloria. "I work out there on the platform every night, loading and unloading trains, and it does make you feel good to have been part of something that contributes to these families. You get a passion for the joy of seeing them enjoy the scenery and the landscape."

Gloria is grateful to the community members who donate their time, energy and creativity to keep the railroad, and Thomas' legacy, at full-steam ahead. She shares stories like that of Harold and Barb Sandy, two visitors from Canada who have continued to return and help decorate and maintain the trains and tracks; Ross Jackson, the engineer who fell in love with the coal-fired steam

## If you go

**What:** Veterans Memorial Railroad's The Polar Bear Express

**When:** 7-10 p.m., Thursday, Dec. 21; Friday, Dec. 22; and Saturday, Dec. 23

**Where:** 10561 NW Theo Jacobs Way, Bristol

**Cost:** \$10 per person for regular trains/ Fast Track, \$15 per person for Steam train experience. Children under age two are free.

**Contact:** For more information, call 850-643-6646 or visit [www.veterans-memorialrailroad.org](http://www.veterans-memorialrailroad.org).

train and comes back to run it each holiday season with his logging crew; and of course, Melissa Durham the leading artist and visionary for "The Polar Bear Express," since 2014.

She says visitors should prepare themselves for Durham's life-sized Santa's Village, Polar Bear Mountain, Candyland, a dazzling array of lights, and music synced with each scene. All ticket proceeds go to the maintenance of the track, the train, and the materials used in the decorations and the lights, and trains run from 7pm-10pm, Thursday through Saturday.

"I am awed by it myself, and can't believe what the volunteers have done, coming together and making this a spectacular event," says Gloria, who notes the railroad's continued symbiotic relationship with the community. "My philosophy in life is that we must learn to share our love for people and children so that we can contribute to the future of their lives and our country in a meaningful way."

No image embodies that better than the Keenans' little trains that could—vestiges from the past chugging into the future and making history for the panhandle.

*Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*