

MORE THAN A
FESTIVELY
DECORATED TRAIN

Operation North Pole

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PHOTOS AS NOTED



ON THE CHILLY MORNING of December 15, 2018, at a suburban Chicago Metra station, a locomotive horn sounding the familiar rhythm of “Jingle Bells” resonates in the air. Children and their families wait eagerly as a festively decorated train consisting of a red locomotive and alternating green and red passenger cars pulls into the station. This is no ordinary commuter train. “Operation North Pole” (ONP) and its passengers are about to embark on a fantasy trip designed to provide them respite from their troubles and brighten their lives. Its arrival represents the culmination of a year’s worth of planning, fundraising, and volunteering by individuals and sponsors alike.

Just as the true meaning of Christmas is more than exchanging gifts, the true meaning of Operation North Pole is more than just a festively decorated train. From humble beginnings at a makeshift

facility and a ride on an in-service Metra suburban train, ONP has developed into a daylong event including its own chartered and decorated train, culminating with festivities at the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center in suburban Rosemont, Ill.

ONP began in 2011 when Barb Dabler (currently ONP board president) and Tim Crossin (ONP’s treasurer) approached Metra spokesperson Meg Thomas-Reile to discuss a group rate to use one coach on a regular service train. That day eight years ago, 28 Chicago-area families of children with life-threatening or terminal illnesses were invited to take a train trip “to the North Pole” on the Metra Union Pacific Northwest Line to see Santa Claus. They started out with a buffet breakfast with Ronald McDonald and Mrs. Claus, then rode a bus to Des Plaines and boarded one reserved car on an ordinary in-service Metra train to

ABOVE: Bowing to service demands, by January 12, 2016, the 2015 ONP consist had been augmented with a non-wrapped coach. Operating as Train 327, Metra 125 and its mixed six-car consist were outbound for Waukegan. BRUCE C. NELSON PHOTO

RIGHT: Adding to each trip’s festive nature, crowds of supporters gather at stations and grade crossings along the route to make sure the train reaches the North Pole. In 2014, a group at the Pingree Road station in Crystal Lake was well-equipped to guide the train crew. MARK LLANUZA PHOTO

Harvard dubbed “The Polar Express” (licensing requirements prevented future use of this name).

Because outwardly the train looked like a typical Metra run, the engineer decided he needed to differentiate it from ordinary trains in some way. As the train approached Des Plaines station to pick up the children and their



RIGHT: In addition to the assigned Union Pacific trainmen, an ONP volunteer dresses as the conductor on another famous Christmas-themed train. During the 2015 trip, the ceremonial conductor greets a family as the train departs. MARK LLANUZA PHOTO

families, he sounded the Jingle Bells rhythm on the air horn, a tradition that has continued ever since. On board,



RIGHT: The 2016 consist included F40PH-3 133 and cars 6158, 6054, 6050, 8415, and 8515. On January 4, 2017, Train 617 was northbound between Arlington Park and Palatine on its way to Crystal Lake.



BELOW RIGHT: By 2015, the program had really expanded and ONP for the first time wrapped an entire train — F40PH-3 125 and five cars: 6177, 6094, 6054, 6111, and 8472. This stunning design had a gold locomotive and alternating red and gold cars with an entire parade of Santa, elves, traditional old-fashioned toys, and evergreen trees. On January 5, 2016, Train 640 was southbound at Irving Park being pushed by a standard-image Metra F40PH-2. BRUCE C. NELSON PHOTOS

guests were treated to hot chocolate and Happy Meals provided by McDonald's. Thomas-Reile recalls that the interior of one car was decorated by volunteers who boarded in downtown Chicago and began stringing twinkle lights in the passenger compartment as the train was in motion, finishing just before arriving in Des Plaines.

On that first trip the mood was festive with everyone singing Christmas carols and playing games. At each stop, ONP passengers waved to first responders and members of the public who came out to cheer them on and "direct" them to the North Pole with signs pointing the way. Because of the serious nature of the children's illnesses, nothing was left to chance on that first trip or any thereafter. Not only are the first responders at each town there to greet the train, they're also available to address any medical situations which may arise.

Based on the success of its first excursion, ONP planned another trip the following year, but with some enhancements. For 2012, ONP decorated the exterior of two bilevel coaches in a festive holiday theme to make the event more special and to help raise public awareness of the organization. Train decorations that year and ever since have been funded through donations made by individuals, businesses, and other organizations. Each successive year, the decorations and festivities have become more elaborate, and the number of participating critically ill children and their family members has increased accordingly.

The operation changed as well in 2012. Rather than occupy a portion of a regularly scheduled train, ONP worked with Metra and Union Pacific to charter its own consist. Ever since, the special train has operated from Des Plaines to Crystal Lake and back between regularly scheduled service. The train leaves Crystal Lake and runs light to Des Plaines, where the volunteers set up loading zones on the southbound platform. Because this portion of UP's Harvard Subdivision is triple-tracked, ONP gets



exclusive use of Track 3 (closest to the station) while scheduled service operates on Tracks 1 and 2.

After loading supplies, the train is positioned around a curve and out of sight south of the station until the guests arrive. When summoned, the ONP train ceremoniously pulls into the station to board its passengers, then departs for a nonstop run to Pingree Road station in Crystal Lake. There, the crew changes ends and crosses to the southbound main to return, once again nonstop, to Des Plaines. After passengers alight, the train runs light back to Crystal Lake.

For the 2013 event, the guest list had grown to 62 families who boarded the train in Des Plaines and were ultimately escorted by Santa Claus himself to

the Rosemont Convention Center (later renamed the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center), which had been transformed into Santa's workshop with a party waiting there for them. During each year's train ride, on-board activities are led by Mrs. Claus, Mr. Conductor, elves, entertainers, therapy dogs, firefighters, and police officers, all from the North Pole.

By 2017, 74 families participated, hosted by nearly 300 volunteers. The mission of Operation North Pole was expanded to also collect some 3,000 new coats for needy children in the Chicago-land area, as well as hosting blood drives and volunteering at Ronald McDonald House and other charities during the year. Demonstrating ONP's continuing

success, 2018 saw the highest number of participants with 75 families benefiting from the event, made possible by nearly 500 volunteers and countless donations. For the 2018 design theme, participants on prior ONP train rides became the stars — literally — as the entire train had oversized stars containing photos of some children who had ridden in the past and volunteers who made it all possible.

Today, ONP is committed to making sure the entire family of a child with a life-threatening or terminal illness is able to participate, with the overall goal of providing a brief respite from the emotional and financial stresses that affect the whole family. To that end, ONP budgets not only for each sick child, but also for his or her sibling(s), because they are just as much affected by the situation. Secret Santas receive wish lists from each child and use the allotted budget to fulfill those wishes. Over the years the festivities have expanded to include

winter wonderland fun, such as playful pom-pom snowball fights and other entertainment, creating an unforgettable experience for the whole family amidst the very challenging times they face daily. At the end of each trip, families typically have many gifts and treasures to take home to help continue brightening their lives.

Each year brings its own touching, memorable moments. For example, in 2015, there was a young boy from New York who was so ill that he spent more time hospitalized than at home, and he passed his time in the hospital watching YouTube videos made by a teenage ONP railfan. In time, the child's mother contacted the photographer and asked if he could come meet her child who adored his videos. After meeting the child, the railfan asked ONP to consider inviting the child to participate. Because the boy and his family were traveling by train to Chicago for the ONP event, it would be challenging for them to transport back home all the goodies the children typically receive.

In New York, the local fire department had arranged a toy drive so he would get



LEFT: Before he greets passengers individually while en route, Santa Claus poses for photos and rides the ONP locomotive into Des Plaines for its ceremonial arrival.

BELOW: Some of Santa's North Pole helpers took time out of their pre-Christmas duties to pose with a family during the 2018 trip. MARK LLANUZA PHOTOS



gifts when he got home, but ONP didn't want the boy to go home empty-handed, so a deal was worked out with Kato USA to produce an N-scale model of the ONP train with a locomotive, three cars, track, and a power pack. Kato donated the gift to this child, and he was so excited that he set it up in his hotel room that very night, even after all the festivities of the day; his parents had difficulty getting him to pry his hand off the power pack to go to bed. He later took his model train to the hospital when he was receiving treatments.

Kato USA also made the 2015 model available for purchase by the public and made models of the next two years' trains as well. The 2016 and 2017 versions are comprised of the locomotive and three cars in one package, with the option to buy the remaining two cars in a separate package. A portion of proceeds from the sales of these trains is donated to ONP.

The design for each year's train, which is done pro bono by a local advertising agency, is kept under wraps until the first pieces of rolling stock begin to appear in service. Locomotives decorated for ONP represent the only occurrences where a host railroad has placed its emblem on a Metra locomotive, in this case, Union Pacific. The vinyl wrap that decorates each coach's exterior is comprised of solid elements covering the stainless steel, and perforated sections that allow occupants some visibility through the windows.

According to Joel Kirchner, Union Pacific suburban operations manager and local point man for ONP planning, the coaches and locomotive cannot be held out of service pending operation of the chartered train. Therefore, as rolling stock is decorated prior to each season of operation, the pieces quietly return to service mixed in with regular equipment. The day prior to ONP's operation

the entire train is cleaned and assembled in a predetermined order and operates in scheduled service so that it winds up at the Crystal Lake coach yard for the evening.

Following the event, the railroad tries to keep the decorated train intact, which is a challenge due to different relay patterns between runs (cars go to the coach yard and the locomotive goes to the diesel shop for servicing), but Kirchner asks the railroad's mechanical and operating departments to try to keep the train together and in a certain rotation as long as practical. They are largely successful through Christmas and often up to the new year. However, operational reality eventually wins out. As January wears on, the cars are scattered among their stainless steel brethren and eventually stripped of their decorations.

Rolling stock for each year's train is selected from Metra's newest fleet members. The carefully decorated coaches and cab cars all possess hydraulic lifts, which are essential to board and alight many of the ONP guests with mobility issues. The locomotive chosen to wear each year's ceremonial wrap varies, but has always been one of the EMD F40PHs assigned to the Union Pacific lines.

Typically, the ONP train crew is a combination of employees hand-picked

from the Union Pacific's extra board and some who volunteer for the special duty. Planning each year's operation and staffing the train isn't the railroad's only involvement — it has also provided financial support to ONP through the Union Pacific Foundation.

Riding the ONP charter is strictly limited to individuals, and their family members, who are battling life-threatening illness. The only other way to get aboard is to volunteer to staff the train, itself a prestigious honor considering the organization's reason for existence. Metra's Meg Thomas-Reile, who is also an ONP volunteer, said, "Most of the 'elves' and helpers on the train are either first responders or nurses, so if there is a medical emergency among the children riding, they are in very good hands."

To see the chartered train lineside, it operates on a Saturday morning in early

BELOW: For its 2014 trip, ONP arranged to wrap F40PH-3 125 and cab car 8460. The freshly wrapped locomotive was posed outside UP's M19-A diesel house on December 11, 2014, with a custom O-scale model bearing a striking resemblance to the prototype.

MARK LLANUZA PHOTO

BELOW RIGHT: The first year that ONP had a wrapped locomotive was 2013. F40PH-3 131 and car 6005 were decorated to look like a gingerbread train with frosting borders and candy decorations as one would see on a gingerbread house.

MARK LLANUZA PHOTO



LEFT: The 2018 ONP train reprised the alternating color theme debuted in 2015 using the traditional Christmas colors of red and green. On December 18, Train 619 was northbound leaving Arlington Park on its way to Harvard. BRUCE C. NELSON PHOTO

BELOW LEFT: The 2017 train's cab car, 8436, was sponsored by the Chicago Dogs minor league baseball team and had a canine in a Santa hat winding up to throw a snowball, two penguins, and Santa in a sleigh being pulled by Rudolph. The 2017 version operated as Train 640 out of Mount Prospect in a Christmas card-like setting on December 26.

JENNIFER K. NELSON PHOTO

web page. "It's a special day of happiness and hope for these families, who are facing serious issues," said Metra CEO/Executive Director Jim Derwinski. "The holiday train and the contributions of the local fire and police departments in our northwest suburbs are really something else to witness, and Metra and our partners at Union Pacific are honored to be a part of something that so embodies the spirit of the holiday season."

From a group of volunteers putting 28 families from the local area on a regular in-service Metra train going to a small decorated facility in 2011, to a much larger group of volunteers working with the elaborately decorated dedicated train taking more than twice that many families from near and far to a major convention center, one thing has remained unchanged — the dedication to bringing the spirit of the Christmas season to sick kids and their families, and bringing a new perspective to all who ride the train and see it pass.

Summing up the ONP experience, Joel Kirchner recalled of one trip, "During each year's trip they have this thing they call 'The Gauntlet,' which is where after the train ride the families go from the buses to the party room, and it's lined with firemen and policemen. I got to do that the second year, and when the guests came through, a colleague said to me, 'Admit it, you got a little choked up.' I thought about it for a second and then said, no, I didn't see any sick children. What I saw was a bunch of kids having the time of their life wearing smiles of happiness. They were able to forget their illnesses and just be kids having fun, which is really the whole point of the day."

If Kirchner's story is the wrapping paper covering each ONP participant's special gift, then Metra Board Chairman Norm Carlson puts the bow on top: "Operation North Pole has created an extraordinary event and Metra is proud to be a part of it, and pleased that our partnership with Union Pacific has allowed the event and its holiday-themed train to become a hallmark of the Christmas season in Chicago." ■



to mid-December on Union Pacific's Harvard Subdivision between Des Plaines and the Pingree Road station in Crystal Lake. ONP's web page announces the date of operation well in advance. Fortunately commuters can ride the ONP train prior to or after its official service and view the interior decorations as well, but without all the pampering and fanfare associated with the chartered trip. Metra posts the train's operating plan on its

Facebook page for a number of days after the event, which can include trips on any of the Union Pacific routes.

Operation North Pole has grown steadily over the past eight seasons as a result of creative leadership and a strong volunteer force. Its success as an organization is reflected in the spirited design of each year's special train. ONP is always seeking volunteers and donations, and details on both can be found at its

For more information, please visit www.operationnorthpole.org