

PASSIONATE NAPERVILLE HOBBYIST KNOWS THE ROPES OF MODEL SHIPS



Passion pours into every model ship that 85-year-old Greg Zimmerman builds in the wood shop of Naperville's Monarch Landing senior living community. But painstakingly crafting a dozen intricate miniature, wooden ships isn't Zimmerman's first calling.

"When I was in sixth grade, I wanted to be a missionary," says Zimmerman, who grew up in a family with 11 children in the St. Viator parish of Chicago's Old Irving Park neighborhood. At 14, he began studies at St. Jude Seminary in Momence. He earned a degree in philosophy before getting his theology degree at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Ordained as a priest in 1963, Zimmerman, who learned Spanish, spent five years as a missionary in Guatemala despite nearly dying from hepatitis.

"I'm one of the few Catholics who has received all seven sacraments," says Zimmerman, who was baptized, gave confession, took communion, was confirmed, was ordained, was given the so-called last rites when he was sick, and got married in 1974. He resigned the priesthood in 1973 when he felt that the progressive momentum of Vatican II had faded.

He met his wife, Jane, when they were part of a European trip to the Spanish home of the founder of the Claretian Order. Later, they both attended Loyola University, where he was getting his master's degree in counseling psychology and she was attending nursing school. The former associate director of nursing for the DuPage County Health Department, Jane's passions include piano and guitar, writing, sailing and leading a mindfulness and meditation class at Monarch Landing. She also helps with her husband's shipbuilding.

"I gave my wife the plans, and she sewed the sails," Zimmerman says, pointing to her detailed work on the Norske Love three-masted warship of 1765.

He was in his late 30s when he received his first model -- a 19th-century clipper called the "Flying Fish." He spent six months completing the project and immediately took on the greater challenges of "plank on frame" models, where the planking on the hull is laid piece by piece on the frame, as was the method used by the actual builders of ships.

"When you first look at the plans, you become intimidated," Zimmerman says of large instruction sheets featuring hundreds of steps that make putting together an IKEA entertainment center seem simple. "It looks like, 'Oh, my God, this is going to take me a century.'"

The secret is just working on a small section.

"I get great satisfaction looking at a section I just completed. It looks great, and I move on to another section," says Zimmerman, who also waxes all the strings used in his models to keep them from rotting. "You're building something that had been structured years and years and years ago, and now it's come to life again."

After completing his model of the USS Constitution, the three-masted wooden-hulled ship dubbed "Old Ironsides" for its heroics during the War of 1812, Zimmerman visited Boston, where he got to walk on the ship first launched in 1797. He knew the ship inside and out because of his work on the model.

"It felt like old-home week," Zimmerman says. "It was cool."

He hopes to visit the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut to see the life-size version of his Charles Morgan model of the 19th-century whaling ship, which has detailed try-pots used for converting blubber into whale oil on deck. The smaller whaling boats have even more detail. "I took a piece of wire, hammered it and filed it down like a little harpoon," Zimmerman says.

His model of the San Felipe, a Spanish galleon launched in 1690, features brass cannons and lanterns. "The back part I had to carve out of wood," Zimmerman says. "I'm not a woodcarver, but it came out pretty close."

He spent two years building the H.M.S. Victory, the English ship Admiral Horatio Nelson used to win the Battle of Trafalgar on Oct. 21, 1805. In addition to the labor of building, Zimmerman researches the ships and their crews.

"It took 6,000 trees to build the Victory; 2,000 of them were oak," Zimmerman says. With 350 men on each deck, the English filled the ranks with prisoners, who were chained to the cannons. Women were brought on board to appease the men manning those guns.

"If a child was born of that union, they called him a son of a gun," Zimmerman says.

Disciplinarians with multi-tailed whips called cat o'nine tails would punish sailors who misbehaved. This led to the expression, "Don't let the cat out of the bag," Zimmerman says.

A lifelong learner, Zimmerman facilitates Monarch Landing discussions on the Civil War. On his bookcase, the New Jerusalem Bible shares space with the Torah, the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita and other religious books, as well as "Joy of Cooking" and "The Complete Idiot's Guide to T'ai Chi and Qigong."

Zimmerman, who has officiated nearly 1,000 weddings of all faiths, including same-sex marriages, says all religions share some basic commandments. "Love God, love your neighbor," Zimmerman says. "That's how simple life is."

His most expensive model ship had a sticker price of \$1,200, but he found it on sale for half price. He notes that he still spends less on his ship hobby than most golfers spend on theirs. Some of his ships will go to the couple's grown children -- Sarah, Michael, Elizabeth and Gregory -- or their 10 grandchildren.

"If ever you want a cool hobby, this is it," Zimmerman says. "I could keep you here all day. This is so rewarding. Eventually, it becomes a discipline. You get really good at it. The skills will come. Don't worry about it. It will happen."

At his station in the wood shop, one sign notes, "I am the captain of this ship, and I have my wife's permission to say so." Another features the Latin motto, "In Medio Stat Virtus," which translates as "virtue stands in the middle." Zimmerman sees it as "everything in moderation."

Even with his beloved shipbuilding, Zimmerman practices moderation, limiting himself to a few hours a day. But his time in the wood shop led him to discover mandalas, the geometric configuration of symbols, often spiritual, that are a popular art form in Eastern religions. He's already crafted a couple of mandala works of art.

As Zimmerman has said many times before, "I have a new passion."



The details of model shipbuilding are so intricate they can be intimidating. But hobbyist Greg Zimmerman says the secret is working on small sections.

- Brian Hill | Staff Photographer



Building scale models of famous ships takes dedication, but brings great satisfaction, says Greg Zimmerman, who has built a dozen ships in the wood shop at Monarch Landing in Naperville.

- Brian Hill | Staff Photographer



The wood shop at Monarch Landing senior living community in Naperville has all the tools Greg Zimmerman needs to build exquisite model ships.

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