

A LEGO cow carousel sits frozen in motion outside the Toy and Plastic Brick Museum in Bellaire, Ohio.



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Back to School

Night has fallen in the school yard. Inside the chain-link fence at 4597 Noble Street in Bellaire, Ohio, a merry-go-round with cows the size of miniature ponies made of LEGO bricks sits frozen in motion on the concrete. A small tin sign to the right of the double doors at the front of Gravel Hill Middle School says the school grounds are closed after dark.

But the doors are open and the lights in the hallway are on. The trumpet notes of Buena Vista Social Club's "Chan Chan" echo softly off the tiled walls as a skinny blond-haired guy

wearing a military-style cap stacks pirates, Star Wars characters, and superheroes on a six-foot folding table in front of a row of black and red school lockers. Tom Erickson is focusing on getting the minifigure display—an army of LEGO men—just right to greet several hundred attendees of Brick Show 2008, a LEGO fan convention that will open in about six hours.

It's the first weekend of September, but children haven't attended classes at Gravel Hill for half a decade, since the middle school was sold at auction in 2004. The building reopened in August 2007 as the Toy and Plastic Brick Museum. The brainchild of Dan Brown, a self-described "adult LEGO enthusiast," it contains a mishmash of LEGO sculptures and rare LEGO sets sprawled over three floors of the massive tan brick building. A computer recycler by trade, Dan has spent the last three years turning the former middle school into an unofficial LEGO museum.

It's three in the morning, and I've been snapping yellow LEGO bricks into a twenty-foot wall for the better part of six hours. I haven't seen a kid in the last four; instead, I've been building alongside Thomas Mueller, a thirty-two-year-old German transplant living in Los Angeles who is sipping Smirnoff Ice and handing me the bricks. He's clad in black shorts, a black T-shirt, black socks, and black sneakers. With his round glasses and close-cropped brown hair, he reminds me of the stage managers from my days in musical theater.

While building, my hands develop a rhythm all their own. I roll a brick into my palm using my index finger, which leaves my thumb free to keep grabbing more LEGO bricks from the red bin at my feet. The passage of time is marked by the different parts of my body that begin to ache as I sit cross-legged on the hard linoleum. Both of my legs have fallen asleep up to the calves. A joint or tendon on the side of my right knee has been making an odd popping noise every time I shift my body. But I am inexplicably determined to finish this wall.

It is the fourth and final castle wall that rings a twenty-by-thirty-foot classroom, rising eighteen inches to meet the chalk-rail banister. Dan has erected the first three walls out of yellow LEGO bricks, working into the early morning for several weeks

before the convention. He is driven by a compulsion to top last year's Guinness World Record for "the largest LEGO image in the world." According to Dan, this will be the world's largest LEGO castle, even though Guinness isn't coming to measure.

He also sees this as a tribute to an elusive LEGO set: the Yellow Castle. In 1978, Set 375, Castle, was released in Europe as the first in LEGO's castle play theme. It came out in the United States three years later as set 375/6075. With a working drawbridge and fourteen knight minifigures, this kit has reached icon status in the adult fan community, with sets going for between \$300 and \$1,000 on eBay. Lost Yellow Castle sets are like Mickey Mantle baseball cards—given away by unknowing mothers cleaning out their children's closets. An important milestone in the LEGO Group's history, the Yellow Castle also represented a new direction for the company because it was the first in a series of sets that focused on a given theme.

"I'm feeling my age," says Dan, forty-one, as he puts down the plastic tub. "We should qualify for some sort of senior discount on LEGO."

He has the honor of putting the last brick in place, squatting down just as Tom strolls in carrying two blue 1×8 bricks (one stud wide by eight studs long) engraved with the words "Toy & Plastic Brick Museum. World Record Castle Build '08." I don't know it yet, but eight hours later I will be supervising close to a hundred kids as they build the interior scenes that will make up the castle courtyard, connecting the walls with large gray baseplates, the flat LEGO squares that form the ground underneath many brick structures.

It might make some cosmic sense that I'm morphing into an adult fan of LEGO at a former middle school, because it was right around that time in my life when I set down my bricks and didn't pick them back up for a long time. My LEGO building career likely peaked when I was ten.

When I was in fourth grade, I built a model of the Sears Tower using LEGO pieces and black spray paint with my father in our

basement. It is the only thing we've ever built together. Neither of us is particularly skilled at home improvement projects. But for one glorious afternoon, using our tiny, primary-color plastic bricks, we seemed as talented as the men who build real skyscrapers.

The model was for the annual "state fair" held by North Stratfield Elementary School, in which each student was assigned a different state as a theme for a project.

"Dad, I got Illinois for the state fair. That's where Grandma and Grandpa live. And we're building the Sears Tower," I informed him, while spinning around a copy of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on our wooden table to point out the two pictures of the landmark monument.

"That's great. What did you have in mind?" my father asked as he took off his suit jacket and studied the photos. This was phase two of my plan, which secretly involved us using up all my LEGO bricks and then needing to go to the store to buy more.

"We're going to need a lot of LEGOs," I managed.

"I think you already have a lot of LEGOs," he countered.

"You're right, I do. And we're going to use them all," I concurred, showing him my rough drawing in blue ballpoint pen detailing the blocky rise of the tower. My plans ended there, and I expectantly waited for my dad to help craft the rest of the project. He agreed to help supervise construction.

We began construction on Saturday afternoon.

"Did you remember the LEGOs?" asked my dad when he came down to join me in the basement. I hadn't.

"Don't worry, I brought them down," he said, gesturing to the large blue bucket sitting on the shelf below his workbench. My name adorned the side of the bucket, spelled out in large letters formed by multicolor stickers. It was filled to the brim with LEGO bricks and miniature men.

I carefully smoothed out the sheet of paper with my ink blueprints on his worktable. They would not be consulted again. We spent the next two hours building the base out of blue, yellow, and white bricks. My father placed a small pile of rectangular pieces on the table about a foot below my eye level. My fingers grabbed the new pieces, snapping them together easily

and watching the tower rise surprisingly quickly. We didn't talk while we worked, but the silence was comforting. We were building a monument to a monument. When the top of the tower was even with my nose, we began to look at how we might construct the top floors. My dad had brought down the encyclopedia, open to the page with the Sears Tower photographs. My hand-drawn blueprints were ignored as we attempted to match our building to the various photos of the skyscraper.

My father sat back and watched me lay the bricks for this final stage of building. I snapped on square pieces until I had completed the tiered top that helps shape the skyline of Chicago. After a brief pause we repurposed two tube-shape pieces from a LEGO police officers set to form the radio transmitters on top of the tower.

"Looks good," said my dad.

"It does," I said, surprised.

"But it's not done. We have to glue it."

I looked at my father with naked shock: Glue LEGOs? Was he crazy? You never glued LEGO pieces, because you always tore them apart to build the next jumbled assortment that was meant to be a spaceship, or a truck, or a castle, or something else.

"Otherwise it won't stay together. It could break," said my father. He had a point. I became excited about violating one of the LEGO taboos of my youth.

"Let's do it," I said eagerly. I ran upstairs to grab popsicle sticks and Elmer's Glue, the true hallmark of a successful school project. I smeared the glue along the side, and my dad blotted away the extra with a wet paper towel. It felt wrong—and I loved it.

We took a short break to let the glue dry and eat some sandwiches, then we returned to the basement. I barely felt the cold as my father turned on the lights and revealed our structure. I tried to pull it apart to test its structural integrity. It held. My dad handed me a pair of safety goggles. They didn't quite fit my face, and I kept my right hand over the side to make sure they stayed on over my glasses. My dad pointed me to a stool a few feet away as he shook a can of black spray paint, a gesture I have since learned would have sent LEGO purists running from the room. He hit the

button and a glossy black sheen began to coat the primary-color toy building. In that moment, it became the Sears Tower. A few minutes later we left the basement coughing, the fumes stronger than my father had anticipated.

Waking up the next day was probably as close to a Christmas morning experience as a Jewish kid growing up in Fairfield, Connecticut, could have. I respectfully waited for my dad by the basement door after breakfast, dying to see how the paint had dried.

I was nervous going down the stairs. Nervous that the glue wouldn't hold or the building would somehow have fallen from the workbench and smashed on the floor. I don't know if my dad was nervous, I just know that he didn't say anything either before turning on the light in his workshop.

The light caught the glossy black paint first—a shining monolith in a dusty basement. It stood eighteen inches tall—a jutting series of rectangles that from across the room looked like a building, not a collection of LEGO bricks.

“It came out nice, Davey,” said my dad, using an affectionate nickname that was short for my middle name.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said.

It was one of the happiest moments of my childhood, though I didn't realize it then. But one rarely recognizes the memories that will last at the time.

Over the next two years, I gradually began to let go of my interest in LEGO. This was my time for oversize tortoiseshell eyeglasses and Benetton sweatshirts with prominent cartoon bears—in short, I made a lot of poor choices. My uncle bought us an eight-bit Nintendo system for Hanukkah one year, and I stopped building spaceships in order to battle Koopa. I was a soccer goalie until the goalposts were increased to regulation size in fifth grade, leading me into a six-year dalliance with musical theater. I flirted with a lot of new loves. And by the time I kissed my first girlfriend, the blue LEGO tub had been left to slumber in the closet.

I had entered what is known to adult fans of LEGO as the Dark Ages, the period of time when you don't play with LEGO

bricks. Millions of children are entering the Dark Ages right now. Most never reemerge. Our LEGO bricks are sold at garage sales or are left in those plastic buckets in the closets of our childhood homes. It's a phenomenon that even the corporate executives at the LEGO Group have recognized by actively separating their community relations efforts into two categories: people over and people under the age of thirteen. I let go a year too soon, and I probably was a few years late in getting back.

But you never completely leave LEGO bricks behind. How could you, when LEGO products are sold in 130 countries, when there are roughly sixty-two LEGO bricks for every person on the planet? LEGO has seeped into every element of our popular culture. Nintendo sells LEGO Star Wars, Batman, and Indiana Jones-themed video games. Michel Gondry used LEGO bricks in a stop-motion animation music video that helped launch the career of the White Stripes. The LEGO collection is even on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, where it is celebrated as a dramatic accomplishment in design.

Over the past two decades, there have been small signs that my interest in LEGO was returning. I have sought compromises, like a binging dieter. A hooded sweatshirt adorned with a LEGO cowboy hangs in my closet. It's a recent addition to my wardrobe, discovered at a LEGO retail store in a New Jersey mall, where I decided that an adult sweatshirt—not toys—was the socially acceptable purchase. LEGO men—snuck into my pocket while cleaning out my childhood closet—hide like garden gnomes in my office. But it wasn't until I was preparing to move with my wife, Kate, from Brooklyn to Kansas City that I was struck by what I was leaving behind. My mom asked me to drive out to Fairfield, Connecticut, to clean out the closet of my childhood bedroom before I left for the Midwest, and it was then that I came across the blue plastic bucket with my name on it.

"Those are your LEGOs—you can't give those away. You loved them," said my mom.

I promised I would keep them for her as yet unborn grandchildren, and she left me to finish my task. I reached to the back

of the closet where the Sears Tower still sat, diorama-style, in a blue shoebox. I picked it up.

Seeing the tower after all those years made me realize that I still do love LEGO. I love it for all those things I built, but also for what it meant to build things with my dad. That tower held within it one of my childhood dreams, the idea that I could join the ranks of LEGO master model builders—men and women who construct giant LEGO sculptures for department stores and theme parks. It's a dream I left in the closet next to blue tub.

At the time, I was writing an essay for *Women's Health* magazine about why men need deferred dreams in order to deal with real-life responsibilities. The memory of wanting to be a master builder prompted me to search online for those who earned their living with LEGO bricks. I was surprised by the vibrant community I found. These weren't just master builders; they were minifig customizers and LEGO car clubs that existed solely to build miniature hot rods with working doors and hoods—and they were a community of thousands. And then I discovered the things they built: a twenty-two-foot-long *Titanic*, a mosaic of the *Mona Lisa*, round spheres from rectangular bricks. These were artistic works of incredible size built by adults. I began to think that it might be okay for a guy with no kids to start playing with a toy again.

Adult LEGO fans all have had a moment of awakening, something that brought back their love of LEGO. This was mine. For a true fan of LEGO, the bricks can never be put away forever. People have built their entire careers, relationships, and lives around this toy. They have developed a language and commerce, all in celebration of pursuing a childhood passion together. And I wanted in to that world. I wanted to build like they build. I also wanted to recapture what I used to feel as a child, while building.

From that moment on, I've been ready to dive back into the childhood world that I left behind, to discover what happens to people who never leave that world. I want to know how people can form such complex relationships around a simple brick, and what it means to pursue your dream when the potential for financial

gain or even solvency is remote. This means not just meeting adult fans, but playing with LEGO bricks alongside them.

I'll need my own toys, however, if I'm going to play together with others. I've discussed with Kate the need to fill our house with toy bricks, but I don't think she quite has an idea of just how many we're talking about, as I've kept the pictures of the types of collections that adult fans amass to myself.

There are only two slight issues. I don't have any LEGO bricks at my new house, and I don't know how to build with them. The first problem is easy to solve. I've got a credit card, and LEGO is conveniently available at toy stores and superstores.

Regarding the second problem, my wife's former college roommate, Abby, voices my own fears: "Kate is the urban planner who builds all the furniture."

She's right. During the time Kate and I have been together, I have attempted to build one desk and one bureau. After multiple instances of screwing in the unfinished side facing out, both projects required some emergency assistance from my wife.

Even Kate admits to some skepticism about what I might build. "I could see you having trouble with three-dimensional visualization. It would seem that imagining things in 3-D would be critical to building."

But this problem can be solved, too. I'll seek out talented builders, at conventions and online, to discover what it takes to master building techniques. And I choose to believe that my abilities haven't regressed with age. I played with LEGO bricks once, and what I made was good. LEGO doesn't change—the bricks today are the same as when I was ten—but I've changed, and the adult me is better equipped. I'm smarter and physically stronger. I can do this.

As I anticipate learning to build again, I feel excited that I'll see the extremes of adult builders, including the Toy and Plastic Brick Museum, one fan's multimillion brick collection of LEGO sculptures and artifacts set inside a former middle school. I'm compelled to learn how a tiny LEGO man is transformed into a tiny LEGO Iron Man and how the *Mona Lisa* is recreated in a brick mosaic.

And in the center of everything sits the LEGO Group—a toy-maker that in recent years has tried to figure out how to court a small but vocal adult audience. It is not lost on me that their U.S. corporate headquarters are in Enfield, Connecticut—my home state—so I’ll be making a mandatory stop to build again with my dad. Not to mention that I’ll be going to Denmark in an effort to understand the culture of LEGO, and taking Kate with me.

I’ve got a year to build, and anything is possible.