

Give the pieces a chance: LEGO® lovers unite at meet

Wednesday May 26, 1999

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FREMONT JOE GREENE was looking for very specific kinds of pieces: long, hexagonal, about three or four studs long, with sockets and studs on three sides. He needed them to decorate his robots, he said.

"I don't care about the flex system. I hate the flex system," he said, as he picked through the pile of loose pieces on the table.

This is important work for Greene.

He just moved to the Bay Area from Colorado to start a new job. He needs to find an apartment in the next two days or he's out on the street, he said. But he still has time to join with fellow LEGO® users to trade and buy parts Saturday during the first official meeting of the Bay Area LEGO® Users Group at the Fremont Main Library.

Many of the members have been meeting online for years, in newsgroups such as alt.toys.lego.

Fremont resident David Harris, one of the group's organizers, said one of the main objectives of having the group meet in person is to trade and sell parts. People are often looking for a certain color or type of part for a project they want to build. They can't find enough of the part in one LEGO® kit to complete their plans, so they search through the collections at the meeting for the part and see if the owner is willing to sell.

For example, some people might want to build a gray castle, but gray pieces only come with space sets, said LEGO® user David Simmons.

"The sense of community is really interesting," said Harris, whose online handle is Zonker. He said people really want to help each other find the piece they need. "It's like extra eyes helping you."

Of course, the hottest new LEGO® sets are the Star Wars kits, such as the pod racer, from the new movie.

"For LEGO® maniacs," said Fred Yokel, "when it's new it's the thing to go look at." But not necessarily buy. Many longtime LEGO® users said they are disappointed with the trend toward simpler kits, which they say foster less creativity.

Talking to parents of a child who came in to the meeting to play with LEGO®s, Greene held up a yellow block. It was a car body with holes for axles. "Five years ago, this

would have been in six pieces," he said. Today, kits are getting simpler and simpler to put together, meaning there are fewer ways kids can play and fewer things they can build.

Besides being a place to trade pieces and discuss the latest LEGO® trends, the meeting also is a chance for members to show off the latest results of their creativity. Most people don't appreciate how much work goes into a LEGO® building or ship, said Simmons. He said his friends don't take much of an interest in his collection or creations. But at the users group meeting, there's a sense of gratification from having fellow LEGO® maniacs praise his work, he said.

For Simmons, one of the best things about collecting LEGO®s is getting down on the floor with his pieces. "It's a way of meditating," he said. He becomes totally focused and releases a lot of stress by concentrating on building, he said.

Harris said he was happy with the turnout at Saturday's event. About 30 people came in after seeing the sign in the library's main entrance. Mid-afternoon, children swarmed around large piles of LEGO®s sprawled across the floor. Many picked up random pieces, stuck them together in any way they would fit, and triumphantly held them up for their parents to see.

Harris was good-natured when curious kids did minor damage to a train set, even though trains are one of his passions. And when a parent suggested gluing the pieces together, he grimaced.

"Then you couldn't play with them anymore."

If you're interested in the Bay Area LEGO® Users Group, go to <http://www.baylug.org>.

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