

Article Last Updated: 10/06/2005 07:57 AM

## Block party

### Club celebrates LEGO appeal

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Inside Bay Area

Like a band of pirates sifting through a pile of treasure, a group of eight grownups and kids huddle on the floor, running their fingers through pieces of plastic booty.

Click-click, clat-a-clat, click.

Tiny building blocks in vibrant yellow, red, blue, white and black cascade and clatter against each other as members of the Bay Area LEGO Users Group comb through the \$8-a-pound pile at the club's September meeting.

"I'm trying to build this flying saucer when I get back home," says 7-year-old Isaiah Katz of Palo Alto, as he snatches up a round, clear LEGO piece. "This would work for the cockpit."

It's not that they're rude, but expect regular interruptions when engaged in conversation with LEGO club members.

While loitering near the mound of loose LEGOs for sale, members frequently halt mid-sentence, then duck away to grab an elusive one-by-two click hinge or a four-by-nine gray wing. In LEGO lingo, the dimensions one-by-two or four-by-nine refers to the number of LEGO squares making up a single plastic brick or plate. Plates are one-third the thickness of a standard LEGO brick.

But those are technicalities.

There's another explanation for the life-long appeal of LEGOs, which celebrates its 50th birthday this year.

"(It's) the possibilities," says club founder Russell Clark, 30, during the group's September meeting at the Museum of American Heritage in Palo Alto. "There are no limits to what you can build."

"It's one of the few ways I get very creative," says Clark, a San Jose resident who oversees the copy center of a defense contractor. "I build mostly (LEGO) buildings, town buildings and train cars. That's what I focus on."

His favorite recent achievement? A replica of Coit Tower.

Some club members only build trains or space craft. Some specialize in a particular theme, such as Roman-style architecture. One man at the September meeting brought in a motorized

10-foot crane he built to

1:10 scale.

"I'm an electrical engineer, but as a hobby I like to do mechanical things," says crane builder David Wegmuller, 33, of Palo Alto. "I spent about a year building this."

He'll disassemble the crane before taking on his next big LEGO project.

"My problem is I run out of room in my house," Wegmuller says. "For me, it's more about building things than having things."

BayLUG, as club members refer to their group, got its start six years ago when a few LEGOs fans who had been chatting together online decided to meet in person. About 20 enthusiasts of the miniature snap-together blocks got together over lunch and LEGOs for the initial meeting in San Francisco.

From the first meeting, the club has been open to adults and children, a practice that's unusual among the approximately 100 LEGO clubs scattered about the globe. BayLUG has the distinction of being the fifth club formed worldwide, Clark says.

The roster of 100 members includes LEGO enthusiasts who live in communities including Castro Valley, Fremont, Los Altos and Pleasant Hill. They range in age from 6 to 80.

The club's all-ages policy was a boon for 9-year-old Jeremy Lee of San Jose. Jeremy boasts that he probably has as many LEGOs as Bill Gates has dollars. His mom, May Wone, says Jeremy's collection started out in one corner of their living room and now has taken over the entire space.

"I just like building LEGOs and displaying it so the whole world can see," says Jeremy, who sits beside a LEGO train layout he created. A LEGO train engine chugs around the track, trailing several cars.

He's also brought along to the meeting a new gadget he built.

Jeremy's parents recently installed new wood floors, and it's his job to clean them. So, Jeremy did what any self-respecting LEGO buff would do: He built a mobile, motorized floor polisher out of LEGO bricks and a sock.

"I had some extra time," he says. "(So) I threw some bricks together, and it ended up being a really good model.

"This is a LEGO motor," he explains, pointing out a Gameboy-sized remote control he programmed to spin the polishing attachment. "The motor's attached by a wire to an electric cord, and the motor drives the wheels."

Jeremy presses a button, sets the gizmo on the floor and the polisher spins a few times before falling off.

Ah, well. Back to the LEGO drawing board.

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Jeremy Lee builds the base columns of his Lego railroad station for BayLUG's "Patriotism" contest. BayLUG has the distinction of being the fifth LEGO club formed worldwide.