

Peninsula kids build with Lego to honor friend who died of leukemia

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Lego was one of the things Amaey Shah loved best.

When his brother, Arjun, bought him a gift, it was usually Lego. Amaey had a Lego Mindstorms robotics set. And he and a friend once built an entire Lego city, which covered his room to the point where you could barely walk in it.

So when the San Mateo boy died in September at age 9 after a six-year battle with leukemia, it was only fitting that a family friend made flower vases out of Lego for his memorial service. Likewise, when Amaey's mom, Purvi, wanted to hold an event to remember her son and to benefit the Kids and Art charity that she created, it was only natural that it would involve the colorful plastic bricks.

On Sunday afternoon, about 20 kids and 10 parents got together in the courtyard at San Mateo's Baywood Elementary School, where Amaey went to school, to build Lego sculptures that could be auctioned off by Kids and Art.

The children, which included a large number of Amaey's friends and several cancer survivors, worked on an array of projects. Some built vases like the ones at Amaey's memorial service. Some made mosaics. In honor of another of Amaey's loves -- science -- other kids worked on a project to build the periodic table of elements. Each element was represented by a cube made of Lego.

Many just followed their own muse, making their own creations, including robots and vehicles. And one group of Amaey's friends made a building with his name in Lego letters at the top.

It can be difficult for kids Amaey's age to vocalize their feelings, said Purvi Shah, 43. Making art, whether with Lego or a paint brush, can be therapeutic -- for those who are suffering from cancer, as well as their friends and family. That's something that Shah found out firsthand, watching Amaey.

"When I spent time with him with art," she said, "he was really happy."

That therapeutic benefit helped inspire her to found Kids and Art. After Amaey was diagnosed with cancer in 2005, his mom helped raise money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, but she wanted to do more. A trained artist who teaches at San Francisco's Academy of Art University, Shah got the idea of pairing kids who were suffering from leukemia with a group of local artists.

At various events over the years, the kids and artists have made paintings, clay masks, photographs and etched prints. Kids and Art has held auctions and other events to sell the art to raise money for the leukemia society and for art supplies for kids affected by the disease. The Lego creations made Sunday will be among those auctioned at San Francisco's Gallery 4N5 on June 3 from 4 to 7 p.m.

Among those who have benefited from the Kids and Art program is Matthew Mingus, 7, who was diagnosed with leukemia in 2009, said his mother, Kat.

Matthew went into cardiac arrest and nearly died within an hour of his diagnosis and spent the better part of a year in the hospital recuperating afterward. Matthew has participated in about four or five Kids and Art events, his mom said. On Sunday, Matthew was intently building a Lego truck that had a staircase for a roof.

"It's been a great vehicle for him to be creative in and out of the hospital," said Kat Mingus, 46, of San Mateo.

Arjun Shah, 12, is a member of BayLUG -- the Bay Area's Lego Users Group. After attending a Lego convention last month that BayLUG participated in, Purvi Shah was inspired to have a Lego-themed Kids and Art event and appealed to the group for help.

Much of the Lego used Sunday -- including a 66-quart tub full of bricks -- was donated by BayLUG members.

Group member Andrew Danish helped publicize Shah's appeal. Danish, whose son participated in the event Sunday, said he was touched by Shah's experience with her son. His own wife was recently in the hospital with a lung problem.

"I realized that everyone lives with some kind of issue," said Danish, 53, of Oakland. "I wanted to help out."

Another child who took part in Sunday's event was Christopher Martin, 10, who had known Amaey since kindergarten. Christopher helped build some of the periodic table and made a big, white dancing robot.

Amaey "was one of my best friends," Christopher said.

Sunday's event eased the pain somewhat, he said, "but it's still hard."

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