



Linda and Rich Schamus—shown miniaturized in a Lego city that Rich built—share a love for the plastic bricks.

it's a LEGO world

By **Gwendolyn Purdom**

Photograph by
Vincent Ricardel

Are you ever too old for Lego? Not according to these grownups, who spend lots of their free time and money on the iconic toy.

When Rich Schamus met Linda in 2003, he wasn't sure how to tell her about his hobby. How would she react if she knew how much time and money a 40-year-old man spent on what many consider a children's toy?

Schamus decided to ease her into it—casually mentioning his Lego collection and showing her a few trains he'd built. He waited weeks before telling her about the storage unit he'd rented and stacked high with the plastic bricks.

"I was wondering what I had gotten myself into," Linda says.

For Christmas that year, Rich gave her a Lego sculpture set of Yoda, the *Star Wars* character. She finished the 1,075-piece project in eight hours over the course of a few nights, and Legos weren't just Rich's hobby anymore. They married in 2005. "It's fun," says Linda, "and therapeutic."

The Schamuses' Dale City garage houses their larger bricks while an extra bedroom lined

with tubs, shoeboxes, and tool chests holds the smaller pieces. Their living room serves as a sorting station where they organize Legos by shape, color, and size. Rich's most recent project, a 16-building Lego city, fills the house's front window. In the driveway, the couple's cars sport vanity plates: LEGOGAL and LEGOMAN.

On a recent Saturday, Rich and Linda sit in the meeting room of the Patrick Henry Library in Vienna, their Lego sets fanned in a rainbow in front of them. Rich is working on a space-police craft, Linda on a fire station.

Other adult fans of Lego—or AFOLs, as they're called—and a handful of kids file in for the monthly Washington Metropolitan Area Lego Users Group meeting, their arms stacked with storage tubs and boxed sets. Soon it's hard to hold a conversation over the sounds of plastic pieces being spilled, sorted, and snapped into place.

There are about 62 Lego

bricks for every person on the planet. The Danish toy, introduced in 1958, is sold in more than 130 countries. In the last decade, online forums have sparked Lego clubs across the United States.

Many adult builders rediscovered Legos while raising a child or after stumbling across them at a yard sale. But Magnus Lauglo, a 32-year-old architect in Bethesda, never stopped building. At today's meeting, he and a friend are staging an intricate battle scene, positioning more than 600 Lego figures in military formations. "I was sort of in the closet for a while as a teenager," Lauglo says. "Then I discovered the Internet and that there were other people like me out there."

Todd Webb, 40, stopped building for 12 years before pulling out his old Lego sets. Now boxes filled with Legos take up so much room in his house that he had to remove some doors from their hinges.

Webb makes his living by organizing BrickFair—the

nation's largest annual Lego convention, which draws as many as 19,000 people to Dulles Expo Center each August—and by buying and selling Legos on BrickLink, a kind of eBay for Lego parts.

It's the nostalgia that keeps him interested: "Lego in your childhood looks exactly like Lego on store shelves today. The boxes have the same color schemes, and the pieces are exactly the same. You can buy back your childhood."

Twice a year, the Lego corporation allows clubs to place bulk orders. At a table in the library, men in their twenties and thirties are divvying up a \$1,300 shipment using a scale, Excel spreadsheet, and piles of sandwich bags.

"Most of us have much larger Lego budgets than we did when we were kids," Lauglo says. "When you were a kid, Lego was a new toy every day—you built something, and then if you wanted to build something else, you had to break it up. It's a shame that a lot of that element is lost when you have the freedom to go and buy new stuff."

Sets cost from \$6 for a small kit to \$400 for the 3,800-piece *Star Wars* Death Star set. Individual pieces sold on BrickLink run from less than a penny to \$50 for rare or discontinued parts. Rich and Linda Schamus set aside \$300 a month for Lego purchases, more during the holidays. "We do not do Lego for anniversaries," she says. "It's a rule."

Occasionally during the seven-hour meeting, a curious library visitor wanders into the room, bewildered by the adults piecing together hovercraft and zombie scenes. But the Lego fans hardly notice—their attention is on their bricks.

Says lawyer Daniel Rubin, 31: "It's nice to take a little time once in a while and just let ideas flow through my hands." **W**

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