

Our LEGO® Stories

Episode 2: Never Too Old To Play



Introduction: What we'll cover in today's episode (00:00)

Julie: As George Bernard Shaw once said, "We don't stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing."

Our Adult Fans of LEGO® (AFOL) Community figured this out a long time ago; they never stopped playing, and they continue to inspire us with their amazing creations.

Tormod: AFOLs actually contributed in helping us getting back to the core and understand and appreciate the essence of LEGO play.

Carl: I am a LEGO man through and through. I played with LEGO bricks as a kid, I grew up into an Adult Fan of LEGO play. And I've been a LEGO designer for the last seven years.

Annie: I lost three years of my memory through my health journey, and LEGO instructions helped me bring it back.

Julie: You're listening to Our LEGO Stories. I'm Julie Foster, and a proud member of the LEGO team.

Loren: And I'm Loren Shuster, another happy member of the LEGO team.

Julie: Take a peek into how we bring LEGO products to life and what we do to have a positive impact on the world in this new series brought to you by the LEGO Group.

In this episode, we meet two members of the Adult Fans of LEGO community, known as AFOL, for whom LEGO play turned out to be a game-changer. We also find out how our adult fans influenced some of the biggest decisions we make as a business and why they continue to inspire us today.

Chapter 1: LEGO bricks as a way of recovering (01:29)

Julie: First up, I speak with Annie O'Reilly, a member of our Adult Fans of LEGO community in Australia. Annie shares with me how LEGO bricks helped her through a tough time in her life and talks about her work teaching adults to practice mindfulness through LEGO play.

Julie: So Annie, when did you discover the joy of building with LEGO bricks?

Annie: I discovered the joy of building with LEGO bricks when I was 15 years old. Unlike most children who get that first step when they're little, I was a teenager. And despite my brother having this beautiful collection of LEGO® BIONICLE® and amazing sets, it wasn't really something that I was passionate about.

But then, as a 15-year-old, I was struck down with this rare and complicated chronic illness, which was later diagnosed as idiopathic epilepsy and a rare infection in my brain. And I was 15. I didn't really know what I could do, but one of the doctors suggested that I play with LEGO bricks as a way of recovering or getting back on track because when you're 15, and your whole world is ripped out from underneath you, there's not really much you can do. And then my mum bought me this amazing LEGO® Harry Potter™ set, and I fell in love. I think LEGO bricks were my first love.

LEGO instructions helped me regain cognitive function. I couldn't read or write, and having the ability to look at the LEGO instructions, find the pieces and go step-by-step retaught me basic skills because every seizure that I had would wipe my memory. So, I lost three years of my memory through my health journey, and LEGO instructions helped me bring it back.

Julie: I know you facilitate workshops where you actually teach adults about building with LEGO bricks and mindfulness. In your opinion, how are LEGO bricks and mindfulness connected?

Annie: I have always believed that LEGO bricks and mindfulness are connected in more ways than one. Being in a moment where the LEGO brick keeps you so focused on exactly what you are doing, you don't even realise that you are

practising mindfulness. So, without realisation, we're naturally in this state of meditation when we're working with LEGO bricks.

And I think that is one of the most beneficial things, especially as an adult, to be able to engage with those LEGO bricks and have those moments just for yourself.

Julie: Yeah, it's that real flow you get into once you start building. It's quite something.

Annie: It's a LEGO zone.

Julie: Yeah, it is really the zone you get into. And what reaction do you get from adults participating in those workshops?

Annie: I have had some of the most spectacular reactions from adults that are re-engaging with LEGO bricks. So, a lot of people have gone through their dark ages, and they haven't had a chance to play with LEGO bricks for 10 or 15 or 20 years. And then I show up and go, "Alright, everyone, let's take a moment just for ourselves. Let's be mindful and conscious of this exact moment in time and let's build LEGO models". And everybody freaks out with joy because it's so creative, it's so freeing, and it's so meditative that people naturally gain so many benefits just from engaging with these beautiful coloured LEGO bricks.

I've had some beautiful stories of the way LEGO bricks have benefited people's lives. The amount of people who've come up and said, "I have a similar LEGO brick story to you", is powerful. And we all band together because we're touched by LEGO systems and our LEGO brick journeys.

I really am grateful for that experience. But some of the other things that people have told me about their LEGO bricks, there's the overcoming illnesses, there are the love stories! I love the LEGO brick love stories, where people have come to an Adult Fan of LEGO meeting, and they've fallen in love across the building table. And I've seen LEGO fans fall in love and have LEGO fan weddings, use LEGO bricks as confetti, which is slightly painful but also makes for beautiful photographs.

Julie: Very colourful, I imagine.

Annie, you're still part of the Adult Fans of LEGO community in Australia. How would you describe this community?

Annie: Adult Fans of LEGO community genuinely are some of the most spectacular humans I've ever met. They are gentle and accepting, and most of the time, hilarious and crazy creative. But the thing that I love most about the Adult Fan of LEGO community is that there are literally no boundaries. There's no hostility.

There's nothing that segregates us because we're all brought together by LEGO bricks. So, we've got this one commonality. We come from all walks of life, and we are all connected by our love of LEGO bricks, which means everybody is accepting of everybody. There's no need for any judgment or concern or nothing like that because we all love the same thing.

So, we disregard differences, and we embrace the things that bring us together.

Julie: I think many people can learn from that type of philosophy. So what does it mean for you personally to be part of this really lovely, warm and welcoming community?

Annie: I think I really found my family when I found my Adult Fan of LEGO community because there was no judgment. I showed up. I was instantly accepted, and I was able to contribute in a way that was beneficial for other people in similar circumstances, but also in a way that gave me great joy. So, it's just something I really can't be without, I think. I need my LEGO family.

Chapter 2: Engaging with AFOLs (07:20)

Julie: And we as a company need the Adult Fans of LEGO® community. In fact, we consult them on some of our most important business decisions. Here's Loren, who speaks with Tormod Askildsen, Head of Adult Fans of LEGO Engagement at the LEGO Group, about his team's work liaising with AFOL members all over the world.

Loren: Tormod, you've been part of the LEGO team for 37 years now. When did you realise that it's not just kids that love to play with LEGO bricks and LEGO experiences, but that we have a big community of adult fans as well?

Tormod: It was back in 1998/99. We had just launched LEGO® MINDSTORMS®. And when we received the postcard that was inserted in the sets that we sold, we realised that actually more than half of these products were sold to adults and not to the intended target group, which was tweens actually kids between 12 and 15. And also that the products were used for purposes, not intended.

We decided to get in touch with some of these people. We worked very closely with the MIT Media Lab.

We invited some of these people that they considered hackers to come to the Media Lab, and when the people came, some of them brought their kids. They turned out to be the most wonderful people fantastic, engaged in the brands.

All of them have actually enjoyed LEGO play since they were kids themselves. And they just told us they were fascinated by the technology and all the opportunities it actually provided. And with their education and day jobs,

database programmers and technical engineers, and so on, they just couldn't resist diving into the technology and see actually what it can do.

Loren: Why are these adult fans so important to the LEGO Group?

Tormod: I think there are several reasons. One being and both being identified very early on, when we started to engage with the AFOLs, is that they have reached a level of mastery in their building because they have practised for many years. They have developed some incredible building skills, meaning that they can actually express themselves using the LEGO building system as a creative medium. And that was fascinating. And it means when they also share these not only with their family, but they also shared with the public, events, share it on online media, they inspire a lot of people because suddenly you can see the "How is that possible? Can you make that out of LEGO bricks?"

So that's one thing. I think another thing I want to highlight is that they are strong brand advocates. There is a large halo effect coming from their activities and what they do.

And then we have LEGO® Ideas. And LEGO Ideas is, it's a platform that is very much about open innovation. It's about taking in ideas from consumers. LEGO Ideas is for adults but also for teenagers, if you're 13 years or older, you can submit ideas to LEGO Ideas. And some of these ideas will actually come out as real LEGO sets.

Loren: And how many submissions would we receive in a typical year?

Tormod: Currently, there are 4,500 active projects on LEGO Ideas that people can support.

Loren: And a typical, let's say winner or something that gets voted to be produced by the LEGO Group, how many votes would it take to get to the top of the list?

Tormod: You need 10,000 people to support you, and to get 10,000 people to support your project is actually a monument. If you base your project on an IP, it's everything else equal. It's simpler to get 10,000 supporters. If you submit the very original idea that has nothing to do with an IP, it can take a long time to rally so many people.

Loren: And when you say IP, just for some of our listeners that may not know, that's an intellectual property. So licensed products like Sesame Street or Winnie the Pooh.

Loren: Tormod, can you share some examples of where adult fans have really influenced the decisions we make at the LEGO Group?

Tormod: I think there are actually some pretty big things they have influenced over the past twenty years. I would say if you go back to the crisis we had around 2003, 2004 we had in many ways lost our way at the time. And they were actually building a strategy to get back on track again.

Loren: Hmm.

Tormod: And Kjeld Kristiansen had actually been fascinated by AFOLs because of their...

Loren: ...Kjeld is our third-generation owner and the previous CEO of the LEGO Group.

Tormod: Exactly. And Kjeld and Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, who was CEO that time, contacted me and said they would very much like to have a dialogue with AFOLs about the essence of the LEGO experience. So they travelled to the US to find them, and Jørgen he spent an entire week in workshops with several different groups of AFOLs.

So AFOLs contributed in helping us getting back to the core and understand and appreciate the essence of LEGO play - of the LEGO experience. And that was one of the components that was part of the strategy that was created in 2005.

Loren: Oh, fascinating.

Tormod: So our relationship with AFOLs is, has been a love story. I would say that. As any love story, there are some crises that you need to work through. A crisis that we had within AFOLs very early on happened when we decided to freshen up some of our colours on LEGO bricks.

And we reached out (not my team, but, design the design people of course) reached out to moms in Germany to discuss how they would react to a slight change in the grey and brown colours. And the mothers were very excited about these changes because it made the colours more fresh than they used to be.

So the change was implemented, and what happened within the next few hours, I would say, after we launched the products with the new colours, it was an uproar among AFOLs because what happened is when you have a collection of maybe 123,000 grey LEGO elements that you are using to create the *Star Wars*TM designs with, and suddenly we changed the colour grey to a different shade that is not good for your collection, is not good for your designs. So this ended up with a nasty petition that was then sent to our CEO at the time Jørgen Vig Knudstorp. And at the end of the story was that Jørgen sent a letter to the AFOL community, apologising for that mistake and acknowledging that AFOLs are there, that we need to listen to them.

And that we would not make any change of that kind in the future when it comes to the building system without consulting AFOLs.

Chapter 3: From fan to colleague (15:03)

Julie: No doubt, our adult fans have a huge impact, inspiring us in the development of LEGO products and events around the world. Some have even made the transition from fan to colleague. Like Carl Merriam, who started off as a member of the AFOL community before he got the opportunity to turn his passion into a full-time job. Now a LEGO designer, I caught up with Carl about his journey into the LEGO Group and why it's a dream come true.

Carl: I am a LEGO man through and through. I played with LEGO bricks as a kid, I grew up into an Adult Fan of LEGO play. And I've been a LEGO designer for the last seven years.

People ask me, "What's it like to have your dream job?" And I'm like this isn't my dream job because this is beyond a dream. This is something I never even thought was possible. As a kid, I assumed there would be ten people that made LEGO sets, and none of them would ever quit doing it. And so, when I go to, I go to BrickCon and I meet Nick Vás and then like a couple of weeks later, he has been hired at the LEGO Group to be a LEGO designer. And I just asked him, "Hey, what do I do?" And he told me, "Just to just send all your stuff that you have on Flickr and apply now." And so, I made a portfolio that day and then I sent it in on Friday. I had an email back on the Monday saying come to Billund to do a workshop. And I didn't even have a passport. Like I hadn't been out of the US in a long time. So, I had to drive to San Francisco, get a fast-track passport, fly out to Billund a couple of weeks later. And then it was a few weeks after that, that they called me on my way to work. And they're like, "Would you like to have a job in LEGO® Minecraft™?" Yes, of course.

So, I went from never even imagining that I would try this in January of 2014 to living and working in Denmark in April. And it was just like a complete whirlwind movie.

Julie: Can you describe your early days as a LEGO designer? What was it like, and how did it feel to finally be on the inside, doing this dream job?

Carl: Crazy. The first few weeks, months. I'd forget to drink water. Like I would go to work, and then the day would just go by instantly. I'd be building stuff, looking at all the new stuff that we're working on, talking to everybody. There's just always something more than I wanted to do.

And I remember the first week that I was there was the first creative boost that we did, and this is something we do internally in design where all the designers

can pitch any ideas for something that might be a LEGO set. And to come from the outside and then say, okay, do you have any ideas that something we can make as a LEGO set? Here's your chance to tell us. I was just working until midnight every night for that week. I was so tired that I fell asleep on the couch multiple times. I couldn't make it to the bed. And just building and running around in our element warehouses, like a library of LEGO bricks, just shelves upon shelves of bins filled with LEGO parts.

Julie: I heard that you got to work with the designer who actually designed your favourite set. I'd love to hear about that story.

Carl: So this is connected to what I was saying about no one would ever quit. Like, that is in some ways true, because we have people that work as LEGO designers or work on LEGO products for their entire career. So, it's only at the point where they are going to retire, that they'll stop doing it.

When I started working on LEGO® BOOST, I got to work with a designer, Jørn Thomsen, who has been at the LEGO Group since 1987. He's this older Danish guy, and I'd never really talked to him at work. I hadn't really seen him that much. And then we get to be working on the same project. And I just started talking to him about what he had worked on in the past.

And he's like, "Oh yeah, just a few different space things and stuff." So, he worked on M-Tron, Spyrius and Space Police and Space Police Two and like basically all the LEGO space themes from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. And I was really a big space kid. Like, I liked all the LEGO themes as a kid, but space was my favourite thing.

And so, to not only meet this guy but actually work with him on a new product and learn what he put into LEGO sets, what he did to make LEGO sets fun. And then to be able to actually carry that forward and now apply that when I am working in other themes. I think that was really one of the coolest things I've gotten to do at the LEGO Group so far.

One of the really cool memories that I have working with him was actually when we were both working on this LEGO® Creator Expert Roller Coaster that came up a couple of years ago, and I'm at the table working on a rollercoaster track. He's at a table working on a rollercoaster track. And then I brought my son to work that day, and he's on a lower table next to him, playing with a rollercoaster that he has built.

And so being able to see the man that's made some of the greatest LEGO products ever made. And then my son playing together with LEGO bricks was just absolutely incredible.

Julie: Our AFOL community continues to inspire us with their commitment, creativity and enthusiasm for LEGO builds. We hope their stories highlighted that no matter how grown-up you are, you are never too old to play.

You've been listening to Our LEGO Stories with me, Julie Foster,

Loren: And me, Loren I. Shuster.

Julie: Talking about the joy and inspiration born from adult play were Annie O'Reilly, Tormod Askildsen and Carl Merriam.

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