

# Brickmasters construct complex creations, building community one Lego at a time

By Elizabeth Hu & Katharine Yao

**B**rick by brick, senior George Donnelly's replica of the Daily Bugle began to take shape. Measuring almost three feet tall, the 3,772-piece skyscraper took more than eight hours to complete.

The Daily Bugle – the fictional workplace of photographer Peter Parker, AKA Spider-Man – was a surprise birthday gift from his aunt and is now one of many builds displayed in Donnelly's personal Lego Hall of Fame: the shelves in his bedroom.

As co-founder of the Lego Club, Donnelly has also built the McCallister house from "Home Alone," multiple Star Wars sets and various structures of his own design.

"With Legos, there are no limits, no rules to what you can do," Donnelly said. "You can just bring in all types of stuff and really do whatever you want."

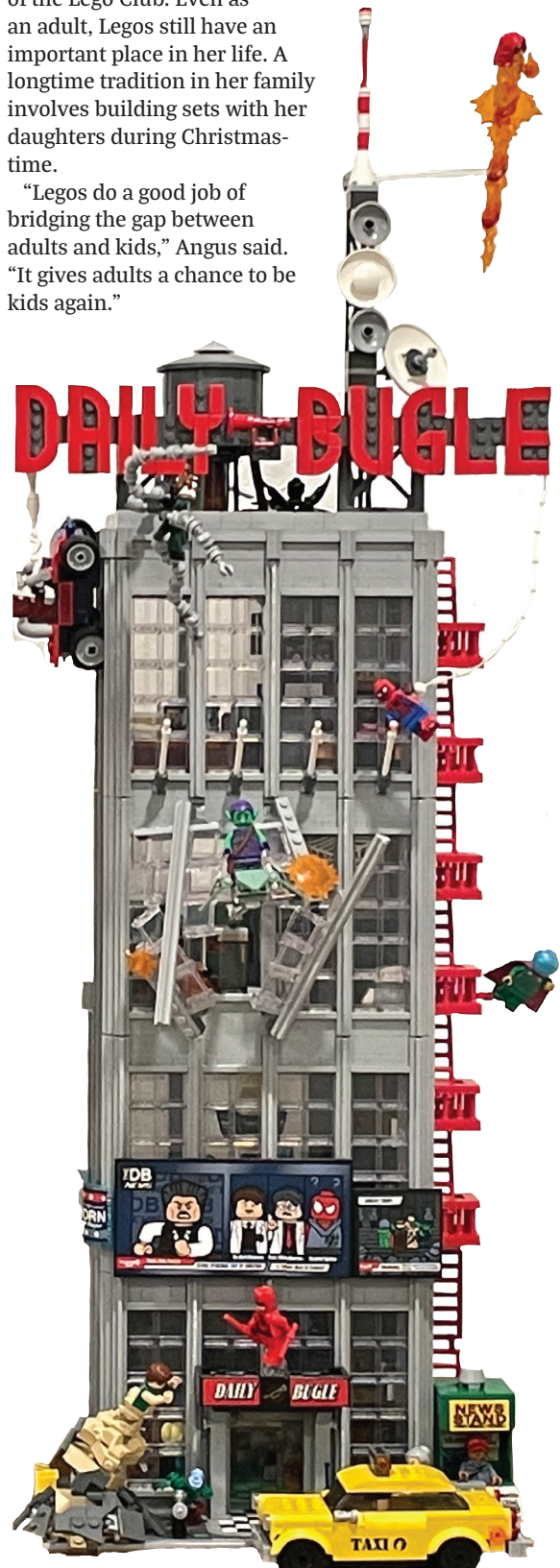
Although following a step-by-step guide results in easier, more straightforward building, Donnelly prefers to create his own unique designs, changing his vision to accommodate the constraints of having a limited array of pieces.

"Usually it comes out looking pretty ugly," Donnelly said. "So I have to change it a couple of times and evolve the idea."

Danish carpenter and Lego founder Ole Kirk Kristiansen started making wooden blocks and toys for children in 1932. Four years later, he officially started the company, deriving its name from the Danish words "leg godt," meaning "play well," which is synonymous with both its name and mission. Ninety years later, that goal still holds true.

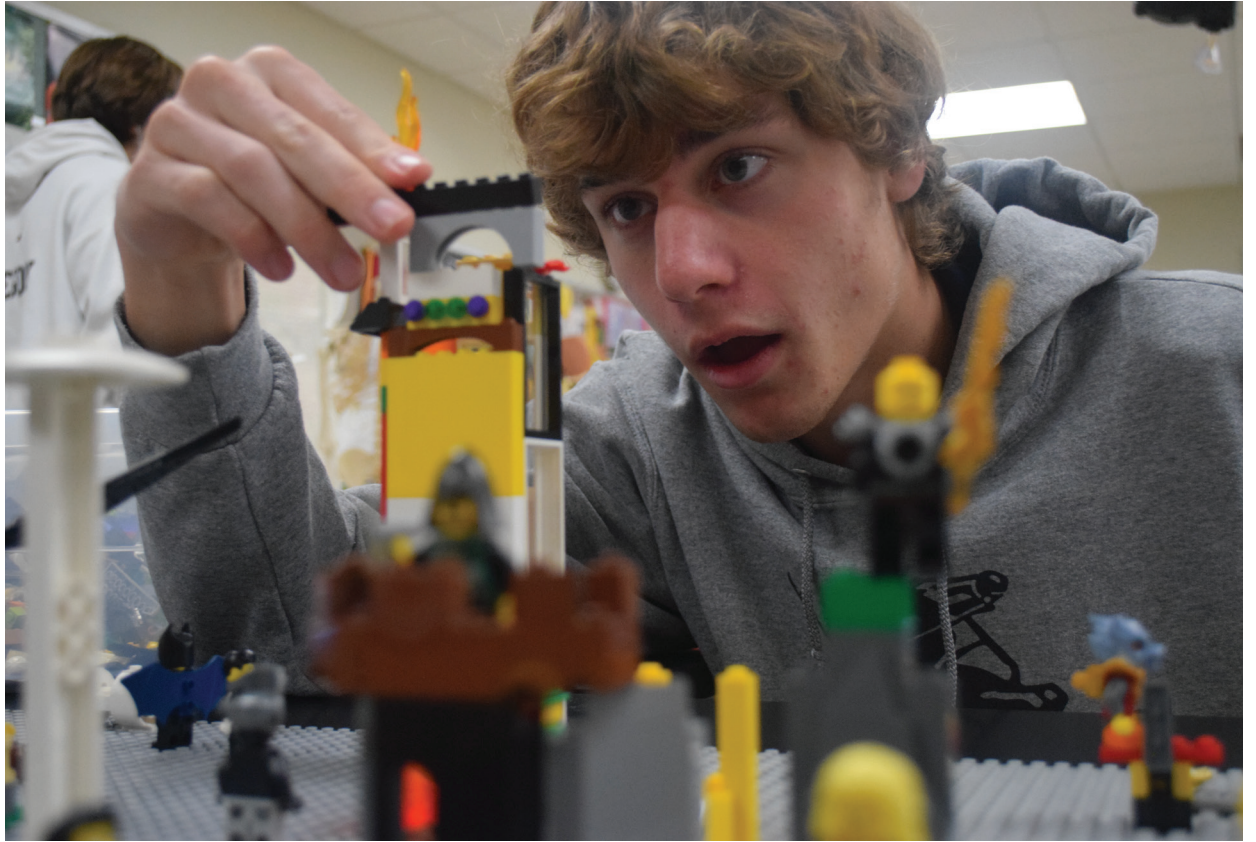
Upper School Neuroscience and Anatomy teacher Paula Angus is the faculty sponsor of the Lego Club. Even as an adult, Legos still have an important place in her life. A longtime tradition in her family involves building sets with her daughters during Christmas-time.

"Legos do a good job of bridging the gap between adults and kids," Angus said. "It gives adults a chance to be kids again."



George Donnelly's replica of the Daily Bugle. Piece count: 3,772

PHOTO | Alexander Donnelly



At his regular Lego Club meetings, senior George Donnelly designs custom Lego builds. PHOTO | Isabella Diaz-Mira

As people grow older, those who stick with Legos sometimes move away from free-building, which is a process of assembling, disassembling and rebuilding creations over and over. Eventually, prefabricated sets hold more appeal – the fun is still there, just with a little more structure.

"It's the building process that differentiates Legos from other types of toys or model-making," Donnelly said. "Even if you don't take something apart and rebuild it, just slowly assembling it and seeing the different techniques to build something is where the value comes from."

Free-building takes significantly longer than building from a pre-made set; Donnelly has spent less time creating Lego structures since entering high school – a sentiment common among other Upper School students who played with Legos as kids.

Not to make a pun or anything, but my love for Legos just kept building upon itself.

AJAY CLARK-DESAI

Junior Ajay Clark-Desai is currently working with his younger sister on a 2,316-piece Lego model of Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night." Clark-Desai said that piecing together the famous painting helped him understand Van Gogh's process: "I'm starting to realize exactly how the pieces coincide with the art itself."

Playing with Legos has also inspired Clark-Desai to pursue other interests. In particular, Lego Mindstorms, a line of robots that can be programmed to dance and play sports, kickstarted his interest in coding.

"Not to make a pun or anything, but my love for Legos just kept building upon itself," Clark-Desai said.

Clark-Desai continued experimenting with Legos via building techniques like sliding doors and revolving cannons. His interest in Lego Robotics eventually turned into a love for engineering, robotics, and STEM courses, and while they were originally meant as a children's toy, they have also created a lot of interest and opportunities.

You would be hard-pressed to find anyone at St. John's who has ever had an interest in engineering or STEM who didn't play with Legos as a kid.

For Lucy Walker, an online editor, Lego Technic was a way to bond with those who loved to make things.

"I could call my friend and tell them to hand me a 12-stud beam and two 6-stud axels, and they knew right away what I needed," Walker said.

"It was a couple of mad scientists working on this project they were just super psyched about." Walker had

been playing with Legos since she was five. In just a few years, she was building sets meant for ages 14 and up.

"People would assume that I wouldn't be able to do something so complicated because I was so little," Walker said. "And then I would whip out this awesome spaceship and be like, joke's on you."

Walker has been underestimated not only for her age, but also her gender. Lego is the rare activity that is perceived as gender-neutral and inclusive. But with the advent of ridiculously easy, obviously female-oriented sets such as Lego Friends, it's hard not to see a gender divide taking shape.

"Why are you going to assume that I want something that's branded to be feminine?" Walker asked.

Walker recounts a Toys "R" Us trip where she gravitated towards a Lego Chima set, complete with zombie ravens and ice hunters, yet her mom suggested a Lego Friends set with a baby seal.

"My mom was like, but look, it's so cute," Walker said. "And I was like, but zombie ravens, that's so awesome!"

As popular as Lego is today, it's easy to forget that the company almost went bankrupt in the early 2000s. A decision to shift more towards digital entertainment instead of their trademark colorful blocks led to disappointing sales. Thankfully, fan devotion towards the iconic toy company kept them from going under. Legos have remained an enduring staple of American childhood ever since.

"There's just something about Lego that has cemented it in the childhood memories of several generations," Walker said. "They're instantly recognizable and really satisfying to snap together."

After all, what other childhood toy could have people outside their stores lined up for blocks?

Lucy Walker spent 15 hours building a model of Hogwarts Castle. Piece count: 6,020

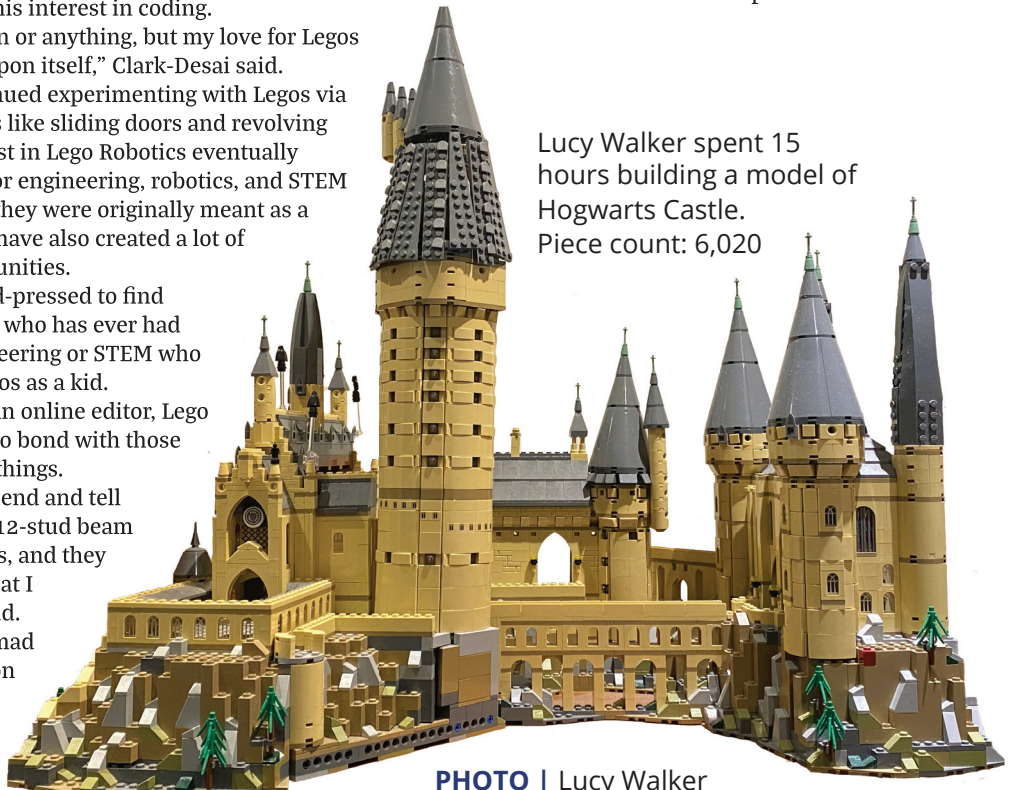


PHOTO | Lucy Walker