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## Lego lovers build a following

Inaugural Lego-palooza draws enthusiasts of all ages to Chapel Hill



Elizabeth Treacy, 12, of Oxford builds her own Lego creation Saturday at Morehead Planetarium.

Staff Photo by Chris Seward

By PATRICK WINN, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL -- Encircled by wide-eyed kids and mesmerized dads, Rafe Donahue showed off his gear-churning, computerized Lego masterpiece.

"What do you think will happen if we make it go really fast?" asked the 40-year-old, his fingers poised on a yellow dial. Donahue's table-top contraption which uses a complex system of conveyor belts, ramps and gyrating platforms to push plastic balls through a maze had lured a nice crowd.

"Faster!" said 10-year-old Andy Snee. And with a twist of the dial, it became a turbo-charged M.C. Escher painting that sent balls flying.

"There's no instructions for this," Donahue told spectators. "This all came out of my head. Kind of scary, right?"

Like most exhibitors at Saturday's first-ever "Lego-palooza," held at Chapel Hill's Morehead Planetarium and Science Center, Donahue has taken a childhood love of Legos into the adult frontier. He's a Raleigh father of two with a doctorate who uses the Pythagorean theorem in his designs.

"Lego-palooza" was a chance for members of the Triangle's Lego Users Group to showcase their best work. Just an hour into the event, about 400 people had shown up, double what planetarium staff had expected for the whole day.

"This has just snowballed," said Karen Kornegay, a planetarium spokeswoman who admitted to underestimating the drawing power of the little plastic blocks.

Hundreds of adult and knee-high Lego fans alike walked the room, stopping to admire intricate displays. Builders stood nearby, ready to answer questions or prevent curious toddlers from toppling their creations.

For the uninitiated, Legos are colorful, connectable blocks that have long been

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a toy chest classic. But they've become more elaborate since the Lego brick's 1958 debut. Modern sets might include motors, wires and even tiny, programmable computers.

Some enthusiasts, such as Donahue, conceive their own models. Durham's Sabrina Gravatt, a fellow member of the Lego Users Group, prefers kits. Her two passions converged in the late 1990s when Lego offered build-your-own models of Star Wars vehicles.

"It was a gift from God," said Gravatt, whose living room is decorated with Star Wars Lego spacecraft. She brought more than a dozen "all the ones that would fit in my car" to display at the planetarium.

Some didn't survive the exhibition. An X-wing jet, which had been handled by the crowd, collapsed about noon, sending a proton torpedo cannon to the carpet. At least it wasn't the Star Destroyer, she said. That cost \$300 and took two days to assemble.

The main Lego-palooza display was a moon outpost, complete with a police station, apartment complex and monorail system. Inside "Crabtree Valley Module," a take-off on Raleigh's largest mall, a Lego clerk sold Lego cats in a Lego pet shop. The whole set-up, built with contributions from almost all of the Lego User Group's 15 members, spanned several tables.

"If you were a little Lego man, you could use the monorail to get to any point in the complex," said Samuel Cox, a home-schooled 15-year-old member of the group.

Lego-palooza was a rare taste of glory for the group, whose members meet once a month to share their latest creations and find out where Legos are on sale. It also doubled as an unexpected recruitment drive, members said.

"I can't believe that hundreds of people showed up," Gravatt said. "So many have asked to join the group."

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