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Nathan Sawaya's Journey From A Wall Street Lawyer To A Lego Master Model Builder

Courtney Comstock | Jan. 7, 2011, 9:42 AM | 558 |

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Believing 37-year old Nathan Sawaya's career change might be the biggest stretch your imagination takes today.

Nathan studied law at NYU and began practicing business law for Wall Street firms at Winston & Strawn. It wasn't until years later that he quit his job and pursued his childhood ambition: to be a Lego artist.

One look at [some of the sculptures](#) he's built and you'll see that he's turned it into [an art form](#) (earlier this winter, his art was on show at the Agora Gallery in New York City).

There's [Lego Dolphin](#). [Lego Conan](#). [Lego Tree Hugger](#). And tons more on [this website](#). And there's a slideshow of great ones [here](#). They're really gorgeous, and they sell for around \$15,000 each.

(Watch him build one in the video embedded below.)

Here's how he described his work to [Socialite Life](#):

"Most of the time, I spend between eight to 12 hours each day creating with Lego, but it depends on what I'm working on. Sometimes when I get really into a sculpture, I can spend 18 hours. I spend a lot of time sketching out my ideas on special graph paper that has the brick shapes printed on it. Then the rest of the day is spent building."

"Everyone can relate to the medium since it is a toy that many children have at home. But I want to elevate this simple plaything to a place it has never been before."

His career really took off in 2004, when Nathan became famous in the Lego world for winning a huge building competition run by the Lego company, after which Lego hired him full-time to repair and expand LegoLand. But after just 6 months, he quit to work in his own studio in New York City, like anyone dually certified as both a Lego Certified Professional and a Lego Master Model Builder with a bit of entrepreneurial vision and artistic vision would do.

And because you're probably wondering what a Lego competition entails (hint: it's intense), here you go.

Take [the competition held by LegoLand California](#) (like Disney, sans rides, and everything is made out of legos) in 2004 to find the park's newest master model builder, for example.

First, Nathan and 500 applicants [participated in](#) "an initial screening and a 45-minute preliminary building test at one of nine art institutes around the country."

Then he and the 24 finalists who made it to the final round went to California, and [this happened](#):



Nathan Sawaya



"The Adventures of Hugman"

On Thursday, the finalists were walked through LegoLand and told that on Friday, they'd be given a tub of 4,000 Lego bricks and accessories with which to craft something they'd see on their tour.

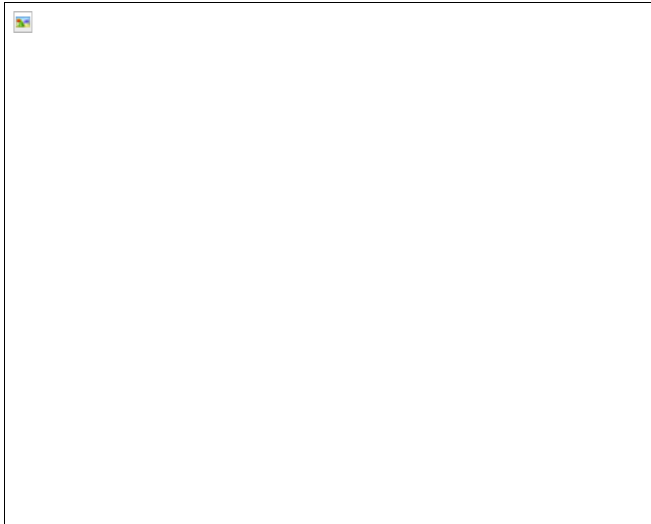
But Friday morning, [the official] threw them a generous curveball, announcing that they'd all be given 15 minutes prior to the building test to cram a bag with Lego from a room full of bricks of various shapes, sizes and colors.

Should someone be making a reality show out of these things?

"I really was freaking. I didn't know what I was doing" without the additional bricks, said [Nathan's competition]. "All the bricks I used were in my bag."

In any case, the competition itself provided 120 minutes of a tense, exciting marathon of building.

We'll spare you the suspense. Nathan, his competition who was "freaking" and one other won the competition after LegoLand decided the talent was so good that they could crown three new employees "Master Model Builder."



"The Courage Within"

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