

# BUILDING BLOCKS OF SUCCESS .....



*The artist with his sculpture, Gray (Photo courtesy of Nathan Sawaya).*

**.....ONE BRICK AT A TIME**

By: Brenda Silva

**W**hen an artist chooses a working medium, it is often the result of something that appeals to the artist—whether it is a sculptor choosing marble, a painter choosing oils, or a corporate attorney choosing Legos. For Nathan Sawaya, it had nothing to do with the Lego itself, but rather, how he could use and transform a viable medium into an art form. Eventually, Sawaya left the corporate environment, and went on to make a name for himself in the art world, as well as in the hearts of youngsters around the globe.

Among this group of aspiring young artists is 12-year-old Nick Connell, who was recently surprised by his parents with a belated birthday trip from his hometown in Grossepointe, MI, to meet his Lego-building idol at the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood.

Nick's mother Melissa said, "Nick has played with Legos since he was five or six, and he's already won a Lego-building contest back home. He wants to be the next Nathan Sawaya, and I believe he can do it." She also said Nick often works on projects with his seven-year-old brother, who also has an affinity for creating with Legos.



*Yellow (Photo courtesy of Nathan Sawaya).*

When Nick finished his contest-winning Lego design, adults immediately pointed to its similarity to Rodin's *The Thinker*; however, the kids were the wiser as they corrected the adults and noted that it was, in reality, Tim Tebow kneeling in prayer.

Aside from perception limitations, the Lego as an art medium has had its share of color and shape limits throughout the years. For example, Legos are not available in flesh-colored bricks, which can often limit artists when constructing human works of art. In contrast, purple bricks never were available until recently, when the *Harry Potter* franchise came along, bringing with it a new option for the expanding color palette. As Sawaya noted, it's the lack of curves, not colors, that presents challenges when creating rounded edges within a sculpture.



*Nathan Sawaya and aspiring Legos artist Nick Connell (Photo courtesy of Brenda Silva).*

Sawaya was first introduced to Legos—the quintessential building blocks for the imagination—as a child. The original tubs of rectangle-shaped primary colors, and subsequent playsets that became must-haves much later, offered hours of imaginary playtime with the benefit of easy deconstruction and new construction on another day.

It was in the world of Legos that young Sawaya could create what his imagination desired. "When I was young, I wanted a dog, so I created one out of Legos. When I was older, if I wanted to be a rock star, I would simply create a guitar. The sky was the limit with what I could create, if I could dream it, I could create it. This was my 'wow' realization with Legos ... their endless possibilities."

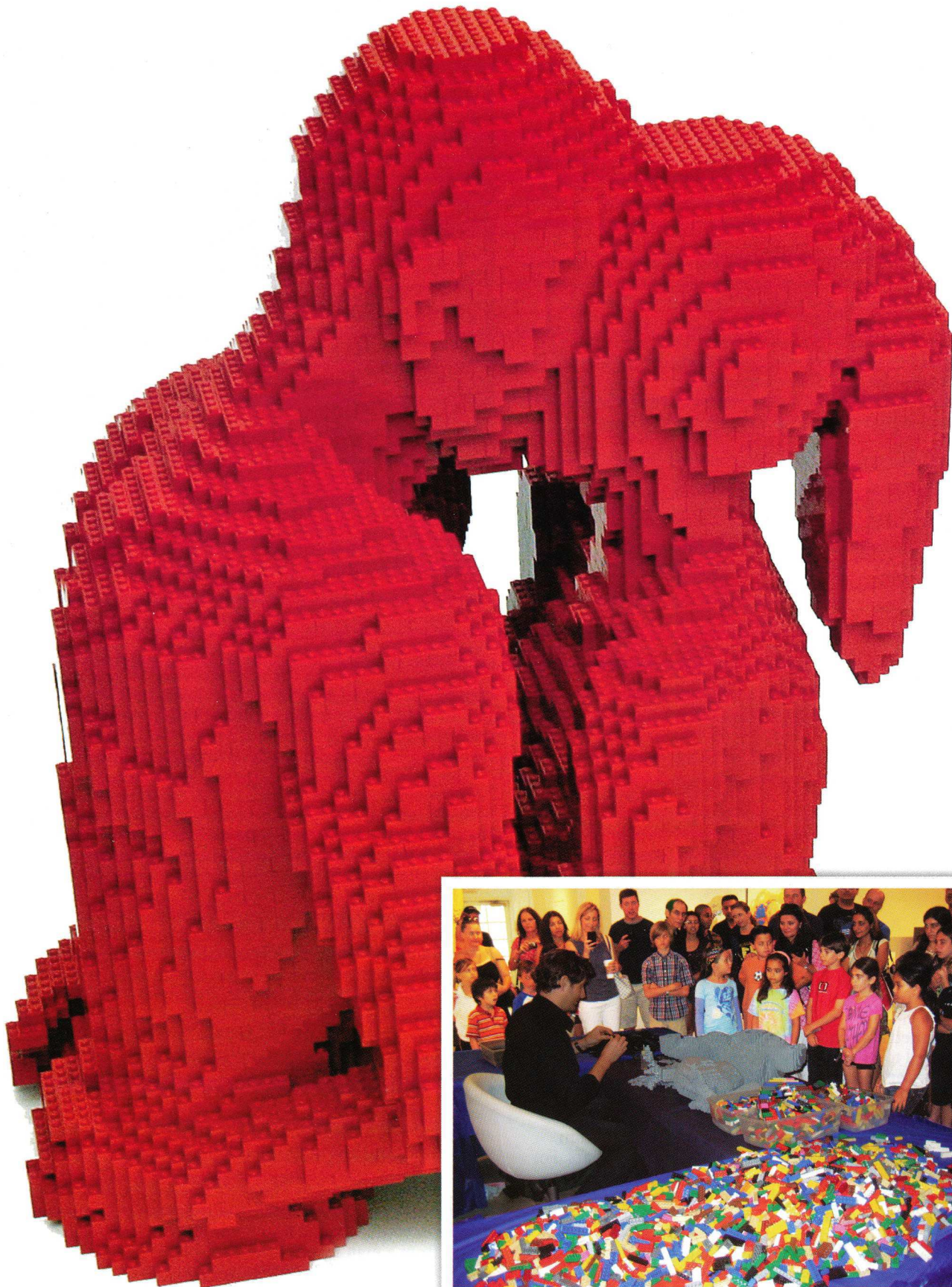
Legos ultimately took a back seat in Sawaya's maturation process, with college and law school becoming his priorities. A corporate law position followed, and while his love of creative expression still existed, it just couldn't pay the bills. Legos simply became a way to unwind after a day spent fighting for justice in the legal system.

In 2004, after a great showing at a nationwide contest, Sawaya was offered a highly coveted position at Lego Land, that of "Lego Master Model Builder." As Sawaya's options expanded his doubts did too. But once he took the position, he began an education and professional career made possible by a favorite toy from his youth.

Over the years, Sawaya has had the typical ups and downs in his new career, with the good outweighing the bad. One scenario involved a child so overwhelmed by a giraffe sculpture that he hugged it before anyone could stop him. Both child and giraffe went crashing to the ground. Sawaya received the news via phone, and found himself moved by the reaction to his work, but also a bit saddened by the loss of the piece.

For those interested in following Sawaya's footsteps, his advice is, "Practice, practice, practice. Get inspired by your imagination. Believe in yourself and follow your passion. Success will come." Great advice from a man who continues to prove you can make a successful living by playing with toys.

*Kiss (Photo courtesy of Nathan Sawaya).*



*Nathan Sawaya answers questions during his "live build" at the Art and Culture Center (Photo courtesy of Brenda Silva).*