

Kevin Hinkle - Community Manager of LEGO® Community Engagement (LCE)

By HispaBrick Magazine®



HispaBrick Magazine: Small introduction of yourself, profession, likes, dislikes.....

Kevin Hinkle: I have the privilege of managing the relationship between the LEGO® Brand and the AFOL (Adult Fan of LEGO) community in the geographic areas of North, Central & South America. I've been employed by the LEGO® Group for over ten years and currently reside near our Marketing & Sales Office in Enfield, Connecticut; USA. I have two wonderful children, both boys, with my wife of eleven years. My personal interests (outside of engaging in the LEGO hobby of course!) include illustration, animation and graphic design. I also have a strong passion for console & handheld video gaming.

HBM: Did you play with LEGO when you were a kid?

KH: Absolutely! As many members of our AFOL community can relate- I owned a large plastic container that hosted my collection of LEGO elements as a young child. I routinely rejoiced at the arrival of a new LEGO product catalog in our mailbox at home. As a

child, I was very impatient and had difficulties saving my allowance to purchase any large LEGO products. More often than not, I would settle on something small just so I could purchase something as soon as possible. The large sets remained on my holiday wish list for a majority of my childhood and I'm happy to report that those wishes usually came true. I have fond memories playing with products in both the Aquazone (1995) and Western (1996) play themes as personal favorites.

HBM: How did you get employed by LEGO?

KH: My career at the LEGO Group began in September 2005. At the time, I was living just outside Denver, Colorado; USA and was in need of a part time job while attending college. To my delight, a trip to our local shopping mall presented an interesting opportunity: A LEGO Brand Retail Store. I had never heard of such a store so the entire visit was quite nostalgic! I inquired about open positions but at the time, there was nothing available. Nevertheless, I secured a job working in that same shopping mall but at a different retailer. I had mentioned to my new colleagues on several occasions that it would have been awesome to work for the LEGO Store and that I was disappointed that there hadn't been anything available. My colleagues kept that in mind and only four months into my employment elsewhere a teammate of mine gave me the heads up that a "Now Hiring" sign had appeared outside the LEGO Store. That very day I walked over, filled in an application for a part-time Sales Associate (now referred to as Brick Specialist) and snagged an on-the-spot interview with a Store Supervisor. A couple days later, I had a

follow-up interview with the Store Manager and while driving home from that interview I received a call on my mobile phone offering me the position. Since then I've enjoyed a long and wonderful career spanning multiple titles, teams, and locations within the United States.



HBM: Was it something planned?

KH: I had never planned to work for a toy company, let alone the LEGO® Group. Although I consider myself quite lucky to have secured such a fun and rewarding career, it all seemed to fall together rather than be orchestrated in any particular fashion. My initial goal was to finish out school and seek jobs in the animation and/or illustration industry. I spent several months submitting resumes and portfolios for review, but no one could offer me the stability that I had already built with my career at the LEGO® Group. As such, I made the decision to focus on my career with the brick and put my artistic ambitions on the back burner.

HBM: How did you join LCE Team?

KH: I joined our department in 2011 when we were referred to as CEC, or Community Engagement & Communication. At the time, I had put approximately six years into my LEGO career exclusively in our retail division. During these six years, I had the opportunity to work in three different locations with three different teams and hold four different titles. Although I was quite happy with the connections I had built and skills I had acquired, I felt compelled to explore other options within the organization. While browsing vacant positions on our company website, I came across a

posting for a role titled North America Community Coordinator. I reached out to the hiring manager to get a better understanding of what the job was and what was expected. After taking quite some time to think it over and discuss with my family, I submitted my application. While still serving as a LEGO Store Manager in Austin, Texas; USA I participated in three separate interviews and was offered the position thereafter.

HBM: How is the health of the North America Community?

KH: I think the term “health” can be defined quite differently depending on with whom you are speaking. From one perspective, the North American AFOL community seems very healthy as demonstrated by the explosive growth of recognized LEGO User Groups during the last four years I've been in this role. One could also draw this conclusion based upon the number of events the North American RLUG community has either hosted or participated in year over year.

From a slightly different perspective, we've noticed an interesting trend in which “LUG fragmentation” occurs frequently in North America. This is when a LUG splits into two separate, independent LUGs (or even three in some cases!) due to various reasons. Although there are a vast number of logical reasons for something like this to occur, the reasons cited most often are due to difference in opinion between individuals.

As this has occurred so many times in the region over the past few years, my perspective on the matter is that the North American community is indeed healthy but potentially fragile in some respects.

In terms of engaging with the LEGO hobby, I'm consistently impressed and inspired by the amazing AFOLs I encounter not only in North America but Central & South America as well! Their skill in building and creating truly breathtaking models are second to none.

HBM: How many LUGs are there?

KH: That's a very good question and one I get quite often both from colleagues internally as well as from fans externally. As of this writing, we have granted recognition to 102 LEGO User Groups in the territory I am responsible.

This equates to 92 in North America (Canada, Mexico & the United States) and 10 in Central & South America (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Panama & Peru). November of 2014 we launched the LEGO Ambassador Network, or LAN for short, which hosts a map that will help members of the AFOL community search out recognized LUGs across the globe. There you can find links to their websites, membership data as reported by their Ambassador and even a short description.

HBM: Are there differences between European LUGs and North American LUGs?

KH: I believe so but not regarding their approach to the LEGO hobby. From my research, European RLUGs tend to be much more rigidly structured. There tends to be a sturdy infrastructure involved with various roles to be occupied and even committees to make club decisions.

Although there are certainly RLUGs in North America that share this trait, most groups are more loosely operated. Differences can also be seen in the geographic areas they choose to cover. It seems to be more common for a European RLUG to cover a country, or large geographic area, with support put into place for smaller chapters or sub-groups.

In North America, RLUGs favor smaller geographic areas that can even be based in a particular city or town. I've experimented with opening discussions on umbrella groups or chapter systems a few times with the community here and each time it seems to spark some interesting debate.

HBM: And regarding events, what are the main differences?

KH: On average, AFOL events outside of North America focus more on the aspect of sharing the hobby with a public audience. I've even noticed this trend in Central and South America as well. Events in North America tend to focus on sharing the hobby with fellow members of the AFOL community. A great example of this concept is by examining the number of AFOL conventions we have here each year. A convention is an AFOL event that focuses primarily on engaging with and promoting the LEGO Brand and hobby amongst fellow AFOLs & teenage fans. This is accomplished by offering a number of "private days" in which only registered attendees (which would be fans) can participate in a wealth of seminars, workshops, keynotes, games & activities. There is a time in which the event is opened to the public so that operating expenses can be covered. In 2015, our records indicate there were 16 AFOL conventions in North America. In addition to long running events such as BrickFair, Brickworld & BrickCon, we've witnessed explosive growth with newer events such as BrickSlopes in the state of Utah, Philly Brick Fest in Pennsylvania, BricksCascade in Oregon and Brickfête Toronto in the province of Ontario.



HBM: Are all the Community support programs available?

KH: Yes, the support programs and opportunities that

we operate as a department are offered globally. An additional benefit of launching the LAN in 2014 was the ability to publicly publish the details of each of these programs on the platform. Now anyone interested in learning more can find the information, not just RLUG Ambassadors. As with any global initiative, within each of the support programs there may exist minor differences in execution due to local or regional laws, policies, and procedures. If there is a need locally to differ from the global operating model, we communicate this with the affected region both within the program documentation but also in discussion with the relevant RLUG Ambassadors.

HBM: What perception is there in the USA of the European AFOL community?

KH: From the discussions I've had, many members of the RLUG community in North America seem quite interested in the governance and/or administration of RLUGs in not only Europe, but other regions as well. The average total membership of a North American RLUG is quite small compared to many of the European RLUGs. Additionally, North American RLUGs tend to cover much "smaller" areas such as a city or portion of a state/province. As such, the concept of a countrywide RLUG is foreign and interesting to the community here.

HBM: What is the expected evolution of LUGs around the world: bigger groups absorbing different communities or greater number of LUGs of decreasing size?

KH: I believe we'll witness different forms of evolution in different geographic regions. For the North American region, I believe the trend of "LUG fragmentation" will continue and we will see more and more smaller groups that cover smaller areas. Again, I'd like to curb this with discussion and best practice sharing from other regions but there is more work to be done there. I believe South America is in an interesting position as it's susceptible to influence from not just North America but from Europe as well. As was mentioned to me

by a few AFOLs from Brazil- it's just as convenient to fly to Europe as to the United States from their position. Thus, I believe the South American region will evolve with factors coming in from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, and that will surely be interesting to witness. As for other regions of the world, I defer to my counterparts who maintain a pulse on the community they look after.

HBM: The United States is the home country of many of the most well known companies that make accessories for LEGO minifigs and they are very involved in the NA events. What is the LEGO viewpoint of this aspect of the LEGO hobby?

KH: Very true indeed! I will admit that the AFOL community in North America is certainly known for their entrepreneurial spirit in terms of engaging with the LEGO hobby. Many businesses have sprouted from the community here and it's another trend I've noted in my tenure. Our viewpoint of these AFOL born businesses is the same we've always maintained. We understand that our products and services may not cover every single aspect of a hobby that one may seek. These businesses have the potential to fill in those holes and service those niche interests. The same could be said to some of the wonderful websites that operate in which a service such as logging your entire LEGO product collection exists. As long as there are no trademark and/or copyright violations and that the business is representing itself properly, we have no concerns.

Our primary focus is to ensure our consumers (regardless of their age) understand the origin of the product or service and how the LEGO Group is, or in most cases, is not involved. Where my role in this becomes quite difficult is that many members of our community will reach out to me seeking approval, partnership, or basic legal counsel in regards to launching a new business or service that ties into the LEGO hobby. This is not something we provide so such outreach and follow-up can seem confusing and/or disapproving to some

algo que ofrecemos, así como la divulgación y seguimiento y puede parecer confuso y/o desacertado para algunos.

HBM: Which are the most "LEGO" Countries in South America?

KH: From a company perspective, we only have an official corporate presence in Brazil. Other countries in the region rely on third party distributors and partners in order to sell LEGO® products and execute marketing initiatives. From a community perspective, we have RLUGs in many countries! Our records show RLUGs present in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Panama & Peru. Each of them are just as passionate about the LEGO Brand and hobby as their counterparts up North. They host regular meetings, events, and engage online via forums, email distribution lists and websites.



HBM: Are there countries without LUGs? Do you know why?

KH: Certainly! Just as we see in North America, numerous states and provinces currently do not have any RLUGs on record. There could be a number of reasons for this- perhaps the AFOL community in a particular area has not organized themselves enough to form a club or group. Perhaps LEGO products are very difficult to purchase in a particular country or their cost is seen as prohibitive of the hobby. With so much coordination and communication being executed already with the RLUGs we do know about, my

colleagues and I don't place a tremendous effort on researching new LUGs that are unknown to the LEGO® Group. We hope that by sharing all the relevant information online via the LAN and word of mouth in the physical and online AFOL community, new groups will know who to contact in regards to seeking recognition and participation in our support programs.

HBM: Is it difficult to grow there?

KH: In some areas, I believe there are factors that do indeed make an RLUG community more difficult to establish and grow. As with anything, I think time and patience pay off when it comes to anything related to the AFOL community! There is so much information out there amongst the AFOL community. I would highly encourage those seeking advice on establishing a new LUG to search online and ask their fellow AFOLs. In terms of North America, I would encourage members of the community to reference our map on the LAN- you may be surprised that an RLUG already exists where you are! Reach out and see where it goes.

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