

We Built This City — Out of Legos

By Rachel Kurland - January 13, 2017



Stephen Schwartz gives a "tour" of the Old City of Jerusalem built out of Legos. Photos by Kevin S. Nash K.S.N. Images, Inc.

Every parent's nightmare of stepping barefoot on Legos was multiplied by 70,000 at the Reconstructionist Congregation Beth Israel in Media Jan. 8.

The 13th annual Eliana Andersen Arts and Creativity Festival hosts a different artist, musician or theater troupe each year for the kids at the synagogue's Hebrew school, but this year they brought back Stephen Schwartz.

Schwartz, a full-time architect for SWS Architects in Livingston, N.J., also runs Building Blocks Workshops, in which he leads students in building large-scale cities out of Legos.

He participated in the festival six years ago, and he came back to create a 400-square-foot model of the Old City of Jerusalem out of 70,000 Legos (his personal collection).

In just two hours, he provided minimal instruction to the roughly 200 parents and children in attendance. And with surprisingly controlled chaos, they framed walls and buildings of the city based on a 20-by-20-foot map taped to the floor.

Some gates were six blocks high while others reached 24 inches.

"People understand three-dimensional models so much more than just a two-dimensional drawing," he said.

Following the construction, he gave a "tour" of the city with historical details.

But it all started about 18 years ago when Schwartz's daughter, a second-grade teacher, asked him to teach her students how a city is designed.

With Legos, he explained city zones and had teams create buildings, showing the difference between residential and commercial properties.

"When I saw that you could actually teach second-graders — and they understood it completely because they could visualize it — I knew I had something," he said.

He then created similar programming with Jewish content, such as building Masada, the Warsaw Ghetto and the world's tallest Lego menorah.

He said visualizing the city of Jerusalem this way has an impact on the kids while also engaging them.

He's built Jerusalem more than 200 times, so teaching the kids how to creatively erect the city is simple.

"I find that people will adapt to it quickly. You can't tell them everything. It's the same way when I went to college and I was studying to be an architect. When we had art projects, the instructor would just give us a little hint — he would not tell you what to do," he said. "Slowly, they understand what they have to do, or we correct them."

He noticed that this group of kids was "exceptional." Sometimes older kids think they're too old for Legos, but these students eagerly participated from start to finish.

"The kids were excited, they were engaged and they're going to remember that they were a part of this whole process," he said, noting, in particular, the group that put a spin on the Temple Mount by designing it with blue and white blocks.

Legos aside, the event was pieced together in memory of Eliana Andersen, a 10-year-old Hebrew school student who passed away from a brain tumor.

Her family decided to throw a festival each year in honor of her love for parties, art and children, said Reisa Mukamal, co-chair of the festival.

Each year they invite a guest artist to lead a Jewish-related project.



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Kids and families from Congregation Ohev Shalom in Wallingford joined as well as members of the Chester Eastside Ministries.

"For people especially who have never been to Jerusalem, it does give a sense of what's going on there," Mukamal said.

Many generations, young and old, participated, giving them a sense of Jewish heritage, she said.

"No matter what our backgrounds are, we're all coming together to build something together," Mukamal added.

Rabbi Linda Potemken said the festival is "a beautiful way to celebrate Ellie's life."

She is close with the Andersen family, and she said the festival greatly reflects her spirit.

"It's important for the children to have this experience of learning about Israel in a way that's not connected to the contemporary political struggles — to understand that there's this very ancient, very rich history," she said.

That cannot necessarily be done so well with a lecture or slides.

"When they're finished, they have created a wonderful model of the Old City and then we give them a tour of the Old City so they have an introduction of Yerushalayim, to the meaning, to the history, and they're engaged because they've just created this with their own hands," she said. "My hope is it plants a seed of interest, curiosity, connection to their history."

The Andersen family was in attendance, too.

Kathy, Eliana's mother, said she and her husband, Dan, wanted to create a tribute in her memory associated with the synagogue.

Thirteen years later, it has become rooted in the community.

"They asked the Hebrew school kids to name all the Jewish holidays, and somebody raised their hand and said the Ellie Festival. So it became ingrained in them that that was something to look forward to every year," Kathy said.

Eliana's younger sister Molly, now 21, was 7 when she passed and was still in Hebrew school when the first festival took place.

"At first, I didn't really know what was going on," she remembered. "It was just a fun party where everyone could engage in stuff, but it's just become an amazing thing every year. Everyone looks forward to it."

When Eliana's first yahrtzeit came around, Kathy wasn't sure how she would handle it.

"I thought, 'How am I going to do this alone?' I sent out an email blast to my friends and said, 'Does anybody want to come have a potluck dinner and help me light my yahrtzeit candle?' I wound up with 50 people in my backyard," she laughed.

More and more people show up each year on her yahrtzeit, rain or shine, to honor Eliana.

"[Eliana] was really, really girly, and she loved life and loved people around her. She loved art. She would have loved this festival," Molly said.

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