

LEGO owner receives pop star welcome



Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen was a popular signer of autographs when he took part in FIRST LEGO League in Atlanta – not all of them written on paper.

The atmosphere in the Olympic building was as buoyant as the temperature outside in Atlanta. The hall was full of music, excitement and happy chatter, as children in colourful costumes snaked their way round the sights. If the roof hadn't been tested during the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, some people might have been a bit worried it would be blown sky-high by the enthusiasm of 10,000 children.

LEGO Owner Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen was one of the visitors to Atlanta, celebrating the 10th anniversary of FIRST LEGO League (FLL) along with the many children who were guesting the American city from all over the world to build with bricks and compete with their own-design MINDSTORMS robots.

"It's amazing to see the enthusiasm of the children as they get to grips with a problem and figure out a solution," says Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, as he wandered among the crowds of children waiting their turn to compete in the Olympic Hall.

LEGO idea in a nutshell

Every year, children are asked to solve a specific problem, comprising a practical part and a theoretical part. The practical part is the actual robot competition, with children invited to build and programme a MINDSTORMS robot to perform a series of practical tasks related to the current theme.

FIRST LEGO League (FLL)

FIRST LEGO League is an international science and technology tournament for children aged 9-14 years. FLL was developed in 1998 as a joint effort between the LEGO Group and the US non-profit organisation "FIRST" (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology). Children enter the competition in groups, and together they must solve a problem using MINDSTORMS robots. The project focuses on developing a child's ability to work as a team member, solve problems and sharpen their creativity. This year 106,000 children and young people from 42 countries participated in the event.

More than 10,000 final-stage competitors arrived in Atlanta from all over the globe. A total of 81 teams from 24 countries took part in the three-day robot tournament.

For the theoretical part children must research the year's theme and prepare a presentation of their assignment.

The theme for 2008 is "Alternative energy". Children must select a building in their local area and suggest how it could save energy.

Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen: "This theme is the LEGO idea in a nutshell. It's about getting children to apply their imagination in solving a specific problem. It's an ideal project because it generates interest in science and technology by stimulating the youngsters' interest and encouraging their creative skills. It is fascinating to see how the task is approached and tackled in so many different ways."

As Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen moves from one stand to the next – each more inventively decorated than its neighbour – a tail of awe-inspired youngsters gathers behind the Danish LEGO owner.

A couple of young lads holding a MINDSTORMS robot stand a few metres from their toy idol – trying to make their minds up whether they have the courage to ask him to sign their robot.

None of the assembled children is in doubt about who Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen is. One boy looks disdainfully at his questioner who asks if he knows that the gentleman is the owner of the LEGO Group. He rolls his eyes skywards – of course, he knows who it is.

"It's humbling to see the reception they give me. I'm very flattered. I suppose I'm the personification of LEGO products for these children," Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen muses, as he autographs tee-shirts, arms – even one girl's brow!



Boosting self-confidence

In the Olympic Hall the competition is under way.

Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen is impressed by the range of robots which – under the control of the children – move mechanically along the specially built track. The robots must pass over or through 13 obstacles within a given time. A LEGO car is moved from one corner to another, a fir tree is placed in front of a house, and a couple of tubs are moved into position.

"It makes me proud to see what our products can do for so many people. There are so many uplifting stories of children who have conquered their shyness and received a boost to their self-confidence by participating in FLL," says Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, who is convinced that teamwork and interrelationships encourage children to emerge from their introspection.

Although absorbed in the excitement of competition, the children nevertheless manage to sing FLL's praise in a birthday song. But as soon as the last line of "Happy birthday to you" dies away, the hall is again filled with the popular rhythms of the latest pop hits blaring from giant speakers – and the children are once more shouting encouragement to their friends in the heat of competitive battle. The decibel level is surely well above the permitted normal.

FLL continues to grow

Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen recalls clearly how the whole thing began a decade ago.

"The idea is the same today as in 1998 – but FLL was a much smaller event in those days," he says.

"It's heart-warming to see how it has developed. We have 11,000 teams from 42 countries competing at a global level. It has certainly developed since those early days – and I'm sure FLL will become even bigger with time."

Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen compares FLL with a sporting event, and one of the intentions behind the project is indeed to offer children the same kind of role models and heroes in science and technology as they can find in the sporting environment.

“The big difference, however, is that in FLL there is more than one winner. Here you can win prizes for many different kinds of achievement – for example, good teamwork and inventive robot design,” says Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, who sees FLL as an unforgettable experience.

“When you visit FLL it becomes so obvious that the LEGO Group really can achieve something special with its products.

I’d really like all our employees to have the chance to experience the atmosphere for themselves – or to visit one of the local tournaments, where they can find the same enthusiasm, although the event is on a smaller scale.”

Anne Sophie Teglborg, Corporate Communications



Original robot designs weren't the only thing the many teams taking part in the FIRST LEGO League's annual tournament had spent time on - they had also devoted many hours to producing creative costumes.