Scott Crawford's Lego exhibit, Keep Building Jackson!, is a replica of the city of Jackson, Mississippi—with bits of whimsy and a message about the need for accessibility. Photo courtesy of Scott Crawford

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ADVOCACY

Modeling the future

To raise awareness about accessibility, a retired neuropsychologist living with MS is building a more accessible version of his hometown—out of Lego bricks.

by Matt Alderton

Because of multiple sclerosis, Scott Crawford, PhD, has trouble speaking. His vocal cords are paralyzed due to lesions on his brainstem—the part of the brain that regulates respiration. With significant effort, he is able to speak in a quiet, raspy voice, like a forced whisper, but only for a time before his breathing fatigues. Just because he's lost his ability to vocalize strongly, however, doesn't mean he's lost his voice.

On the contrary: MS has made him all the more determined to get his message out. Not unlike the iconic advice in the film **Field of Dreams**—"If you build it, they will come"—Dr. Crawford's message is: "If you build it, they will come around."

Instead of building a baseball field, however, Dr. Crawford is building a city. A replica of Jackson, Mississippi, to be exact, which he's constructing out of Lego bricks in order to emphatically convey something with his hands that he's unable to shout with his mouth.

"I'm a very civic-minded person, so I'm always thinking about changing things for the better in very systemic ways," says Dr. Crawford, who grew up in Mississippi and moved back there in 2006, having spent most of his adult life in Miami. "Like many cities, Jackson has its share of urban blight. I wanted to show what Jackson can and will be like when we all start caring a little more. So, I started building a Lego village that I call Keep Building Jackson!"

Featuring Lego reproductions of actual city buildings, the miniature city embodies Dr. Crawford's idyllic vision for what his city should be. It includes bits of whimsy, such as the presence of Batman and Superman, but also civic themes of serious import, like sustainable and accessible mass transit, renewable energy and—especially important to Dr. Crawford and his local MS community—accessibility.

The front entrance of Bailey Magnet School (grades 6-8), built in 1938. Photo courtesy of Scott Crawford

Becoming an advocate

The inspiration for the display comes directly from his own experience, says Dr. Crawford, a retired neuropsychologist who began exhibiting MS symptoms in 1999.

Dr. Crawford spent the next three years in and out of the hospital until he was finally diagnosed with primary-progressive MS in 2002. By then, he'd already lost his job, his home and his speaking voice. Next, he lost his mobility, and then his relationship with his fiancée.

"That's when I decided to come home to Mississippi," says Dr. Crawford, who regained independence with the help of a power wheelchair and a centrally located home. "There's a bus stop right across the street, so I can take the bus wherever I need to go. It's a blessing. But it's also where my problems with Jackson started, because I found out the hard way that most of the city's buses had non-working wheelchair lifts. Day in and day out I'd try to take the bus, and day in and day out they'd say, 'The lift doesn't work,' and leave me in the dust."

Determined to see a change, Dr. Crawford began studying the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and became a local advocate for ADA compliance. He subsequently co-founded an advisory council that provides input to the city on accessibility issues, and in 2008, brought a lawsuit against the city, compelling it to fill its transportation gap.

As a result of Dr. Crawford and others' advocacy, "[Jackson] now has a paratransit system that's meaningful, and most of the time actually gets people where they need to go," Dr. Crawford says.

A better Jackson

When Dr. Crawford's interest in accessibility intersected with his lifelong love of Lego, Keep Building Jackson! was born.

"Lego was my favorite toy as a kid," says Dr. Crawford, who continued building Lego models as an adult as a nonverbal distraction from his very verbal career. "When I got MS, I started using Lego bricks for occupational therapy, to keep my hands busy; for cognitive therapy, to keep my mind sharp; and for emotional therapy, to take my mind off my problems."

A self-confessed "Trekkie," Dr. Crawford historically had built Star Trek models. One year at Christmastime, however, he decided to build a train and Christmas village around his tree. When his friends saw it and suggested he display it publicly, he conceived the idea for Keep Building Jackson!—a miniaturized, fully accessible version of his beloved city.

"I don't have all the abilities I used to have, but whatever I have left I want to reconfigure like Lego bricks to make something important," says Dr. Crawford.

The project's ADA-compliant highlights include a version of downtown Jackson's Smith Park that features an outdoor bandstand with a wheelchair ramp, which the real-life stage lacks; a replica of the Jackson Convention Complex, but featuring marked accessible parking spots and push-button front doors; and an imaginary city park, the centerpiece of which is a zip line attraction that sits atop a series of sloped climbing surfaces designed to be wheelchair-accessible.

"The project [also] has accessible sidewalks, and much of the real Jackson does not," explains Dr. Crawford, who has even made adaptations to his mini city's residents. "Most Lego kits don't feature people in wheelchairs, so I've invented several different models of wheelchairs, both manual and power."

Today, the replica is made from an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 bricks. Recent additions include Jackson's Standard Life building, which took 30,000 bricks and six months to build, and Keep Building Jackson! Hospital, an aspirational hospital serving Dr. Crawford's utopian Jackson.

"I did all the interior rooms of the hospital, including an MRI," boasts Crawford, who funds the exhibit with donations from citizens and sponsors. "On the ground floor is a contraption that I call the Cure-o-matic because it can cure everything. It's orange for the National MS Society, because in my imagination that's the machine that's going to cure MS."

Along with its many accessibility highlights, visitors will notice in the display solar panels, wind turbines and an abundance of trees and flowers, all of which are critical ingredients for a better Jackson, according to Dr. Crawford.

"It's hard to know what ultimately will inspire change," Dr. Crawford concludes, "but I hope my project will be a part of that change by creating civic pride and ownership in our city and its future."

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer.

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ACCESSIBILITY 101

Scott Crawford, PhD, dreams of a future in which cities are accessible to everyone—including people with MS. Here are a few ways he says cities and private businesses can move toward building that future:

- **Install wheelchair ramps:** "The easiest thing businesses can do is put wheelchair ramps at the main entrances to buildings," Dr. Crawford says.
- **Make doors easy to open:** "Make the door as light as you can possibly make it so that someone with limited strength can open it," Dr. Crawford advises. "Also, the handle should be a lever-style handle that can be opened with a closed fist—although if you have a high-traffic or multi-use building, you really should have automatic doors that can be opened by pressing a panel with a closed fist."
- **Complete streets:** "The best thing public cities and towns can do is to create complete streets," explains Dr. Crawford, who says "complete streets" provide features such as curb ramps; audible or tactile signals for blind pedestrians; longer crossing times at crosswalks; smooth sidewalks that are free of obstacles; usable benches; and transit stops that have ample space to safely approach, wait and board.
- **Provide accessible transportation:** "A lot of folks with disabilities are stuck at home because they don't have affordable, accessible public transit," Crawford says.
- **Create accessible housing:** "Cities should incorporate affordable, ADA-accessible housing in all new apartment, condo and mixed-use developments that are built," Crawford says.

Individuals can advocate for accessibility in their own cities by contacting local government representatives and business owners.

To learn more about ADA accessibility requirements, visit **ADA.gov** or call the toll-free information line at 1-800-514-0301.

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