

# DAN JEZEK AND THE STORY OF BRICKLINK

First welcome. This is Eliska and my sixth year at Brickvention. We love it, and all of you. We look so forward to another great three days in Melbourne, one of our favorite places on Earth.

- How many here are members of Bricklink?
- How many are not?

Not sure what you know about us . . .

I'm Larry Hawthorne and this is Eliska Jezkova. Eliska is the former CEO and I was the General Manager for Bricklink after my stepson and Eliska's son Daniel Jezek died in 2010. Dan founded BrickLink in 2000 and ran it practically alone for 10 years. We ran it for 3 years after he died and in 2013, we handed off BrickLink to Jay Kim and his team who run it to this day.

That has given us something that is hard to come by . . . time to come to places like Brickvention. We try to spread word of Dan and his legacy, and frankly to reach out to people when he no longer can. Let me take just a few minutes of your time and tell you the story of Bricklink. It's Dan's story as well.

- How did Bricklink come to be? And almost not even happen.
- How much was planned, how much was happenstance, and how much was just plain old good luck?

I don't want to fill you with statistics or forecasts on where Bricklink goes from here. It did well in the past, is doing well now and the future remains bright. Dan left all of us with a pretty good outlook for Bricklink and that stands to this day.

But when I see Bricklink, I often think of it simply as a story about

**The right guy, who was in the right place, and at the right time.**

So let's begin with the guy. That man was Daniel Jezek.

## **THE RIGHT GUY**

Dan was born Jun 25<sup>th</sup>, 1977, in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in what was then the Communist Eastern Bloc, behind the Iron Curtain.

His parents were both well-educated. His mother, Eliska, was a teacher and lawyer, earning a law degree from the Charles University.

His father, Jaroslav Jezek, was already a famous mathematician in Europe. He made a name for himself in 1980 when he produced important work toward solving decades old Alfred Hilbert and Alfred Tarski mathematical theorems. These were head-scratching problems that mathematicians already knew the answers to, but had no way to prove it. Jaroslav Jezek was able to do just that, to prove it when no one else could.

It earned him an important chair at Charles University in Prague and enabled him to attend conferences and serve visiting guest professorships beyond the Iron Curtain at universities in the West. In Germany, the U.S. and Canada. South Carolina (USC), California (Berkeley) Tennessee (Vanderbilt) and even as far away as Hawaii.

For Jaroslav and Eliska the notoriety didn't translate to money, but prestige and even influence. For little Dan it meant a few basic Lego sets and even an early no-frills Leading Edge computer. Dan built his first Lego set, a firehouse, at age three and programmed his first basic computer game at 12. Lego and computers became a passion Daniel Jezek, for the rest of his life.

I should add here that Dan was a very sickly kid. The environment in Prague of that time was toxic to him, and he was constantly back and forth with the doctor for most of his first childhood.

## **THE RIGHT PLACE**

So where would be the right place. It wasn't Prague, or Communist Czechoslovakia. Or any other place behind the Iron Curtain.

Over time, aspiring expectations being what they are, the family migrated to the West, not just for opportunity, but for a better, more healthful place to raise Dan. On Christmas Eve 1990, a little more than a year after the Berlin Wall came down the family landed in Honolulu, where Jaroslav had been offered a visiting professorship at University of Hawaii in Manoa. Jaroslav would travel back and forth between Hawaii and what became the Czech Republic for a number of years but Dan and his mother never left.

They stayed on and Dan thrived in Hawaii. He got well. He got strong

(anecdote he hit the gym and won weight-lifting contests)

He was educated in local schools and learned English. Dan graduated from Kalaheo High School on Oahu's windward side in 1996 and went on to the University of Hawaii to study Computer Science. All the while he maintained his love of Lego and for computers, or, as they now called it, "information technology".

So let's fast-forward to 1999. Dan is 22 years old and pretty good with a computer keyboard and working with Lego bricks. He has a European background and an American outlook. He has almost no accent, fluent in English and an excellent writer as well. Within

three years he will be nationalized as a U.S. citizen. His conversion is complete and he is **now the perfect guy and in the right place** to found a website called Bricklink.

## **THE RIGHT TIME**

And it's the right time as well. It's the dawn of the new millennium and if you look around, you see that Lego the company has hit a bump in the road. Business is slowing. A few ill-timed set designs – doll houses (Scala), baby duplo (Primo), and action figures (galador) – are a commercial bust. They don't auger well for the company's future.

Around this time, Dan catches on with a local Honolulu bank in the rush to augment computer help to deal with the Y2K scare that was in full bloom. You may remember all the world's computers were due to crash come December 31<sup>st</sup> at midnight and the world would come to an abrupt end. Well. . . no . . . that didn't happen.

Dan stayed on with First Hawaiian Bank working on their proprietary software. On the side, Dan still stayed active with his Lego, buying sets and designing his own MOCs when he could gather the bricks. That meant a lot of yard sales and bulk Lego if he was lucky. He financing his habit selling his own Lego on a relatively new place called eBay (1995) and made use of a site called PayPal that came around in early 1999.

On Lugnet he trades information with fellow Lego enthusiasts on methods to trade and accumulate bricks. Ebay is one possibility, but Dan reveals plans to build his own online store to better market his own Lego. And he decides to make use of PayPal to turn transactions into common currency.

Dan began a search for another computer job, after his Bank cuts back on IT staff. A local Island startup is interesting, but to compete for a job he has to go home and learn new web-friendly programming languages like Javascript and Visual Basic. Although Dan does well during the recruitment process, the company eventually picks someone else. Close, but no cigar as they say.

This is the spring of 2000. Losing out on that new fulltime employment opportunity may have been the most critical development that led to what is today BrickLink.

Disappointment in not being selected aside, competing for that job gave Dan a leg-up on the programming languages he would need to code an online store. And instead of working for someone else he began refocusing his attention on developing something new that he could control and work himself.

By that summer of 2000 Dan had bounced his ideas and a couple of test sites off fellow Lugnet users. He started with “Dan’s Parts Fodder” on May 10, 2000. This was Dan’s own online store, crafted with Javascript. He listed a total of 8711 parts available. Primitive though it was, other potential sellers were impressed by it and asked if they could join their stores with Dan’s. **BrickBay was born.** On June 19, 2000, BrickBay, the precursor of BrickLink, went live with 15 stores. Only two had any inventory. But it was a start.

I could say the rest is history. And to a great degree it was. But there were some milestones as BrickBay grew by leaps and bounds, always under the stewardship of Daniel Jezek.

That first (half) year for BrickBay was modest enough. The website hosted \$171,417.77 in business. The next full year, 2001,

saw nearly \$900,000 worth of LEGO change hands on BrickBay. Business has been climbing ever since.

Within a couple of years BrickBay's growth caught the attention of eBay. One of their lawyers fired off a threatening nastygram calling BrickBay a violation of their trademark. I guess the "Bay" was a little too close for their comfort. In 2002 there were still plenty of URLs available and it was a lot easier to switch than fight. Dan, Eliska and I sat around a table in Honolulu throwing out new possibilities. Brick Nation? Brick Bastion? Brick Vault? I do remember that Eliska came up with the winning entry. "Hey, the website is a link to AFOLs and their hobby," she said. She did have a point. Dan agreed and that was that. Bricklink it was, and BrickLink it is.

So . . . what had Dan established, whether or not he even realized it at the time?

- It was an online marketplace where you could buy or sell individual LEGO bricks and sets. If you needed 40 of a particular piece for something you were building, you could find it on BrickLink and order it from anywhere in the world. That was a revolutionary concept.
- It allowed businesses to be born, as stores on BrickLink. BrickLink has put a lot of kids through college and become the livelihood for a lot of people, maybe a few here today.
- It had an incredible reference catalog – giving each item a number and establishing a common cataloging system for the thousands and thousands of LEGO parts.
- It also cataloged the many LEGO sets that have existed over decades past. Want to know what parts were in a set from 1977? You could find out on BrickLink.

- A forum for AFOLs around the world to chat and bond as a community.
- And it served as catalyst for events like Brickvention. Because you can't build the MOCs if you don't have the bricks.
- 

In April 2010 one of the last major features Dan added to BrickLink before he died was an international monetary exchange engine in April 2010 that allowed sellers – almost anywhere in the world – to sell in their own currency and their customers to buy in theirs as well. Every two hours the website is updated with the latest exchange rates for dozens of currencies. It is a prime reason from that point on more stores were opening outside the U.S. than within, and that includes Europe and right here Down Under as well.

If any more proof were needed that might have arrived a couple of weeks ago when **BrickLink reached a major milestone of a million registered members.** Today, that membership number is growing at annual rate of around 18%, so there is plenty more to come. And by the way, since the advent of BrickLink, the LEGO Group has done pretty well themselves. That downturn in the 90s may just have been a blip, or maybe the world's largest online LEGO marketplace might have helped a little along the way. BrickLink's symbiotic relationship with the LEGO group continues. That's not just me saying that. In Billund, Denmark, LEGO headquarters in August that was a clear message we received.

So, **Dan really did have the “spirit of the brick” with him, at the right time, and in the right place.** His background gave him a global perspective from the start and his personal passion and love for all things LEGO makes it hard to imagine anyone more suited to found BrickLink in that place, and at that time than Daniel

Jezek. And for those who think they need to plan it all out in advance and have all the answers to succeed, just remember, all Dan ever wanted to do was to start his own online store to sell his own bricks. That was Dan's goal, BrickLink just happened to be the result.

Thank you. Please visit [danjezek.com](http://danjezek.com) for more on the story.

-30-