

The Building Blocks of a Life Well Played



Jean Mason '64 doesn't sit still. He's always up to something, whether it's building a new Lego creation or making breakfast for a grandchild or walking on the campus he traversed as a student years ago, or picking up another grandchild from that same campus.

He's inquisitive by nature, always looking for the next interesting thing, and that vision is what set the trajectory for his professional career while leading him on adventures around the world.

Mason met his future wife, **Leigh '65**, during his sophomore year at Country Day School. They've been together ever since. Back then, though, his days were filled with studying and sports as he enjoyed learning alongside his twin brother, **Jay '64**. "Part of my academic experience was realizing that he was a lot smarter than I was," notes Mason, ever humble. He knows that attending CDS set him and his peers on the path to college, and he considers that a privilege. His Country Day teachers, all unique, imbued tremendous respect for the profession of teaching that he carries to this day. "It's the most noble thing a young person can do," he said, "to really make a difference in someone's life." He flexed his writing muscles

in the school's literary review, worked behind the scenes on Troubadour productions, and enjoyed playing football and soccer.

He also remembers taking Leigh to a junior prom and throwing students in the pond senior year (a tradition that continues to this day when the first senior accepted to college gets tossed into Polk Pond), and beating Burroughs in football his junior year only to get "our butts kicked badly our senior year."

Leigh's father got Mason interested in photography during his junior year, and the hobby helped define the rest of his life. "My interest continued through four years at Bowdoin College where I definitely spent more time in the darkroom than in the classroom," he said. He photographed for his college newspaper and yearbook, and the local Brunswick, Maine, paper. The summer before his senior year of college, he worked as an intern in New York at "the hottest ad agency in the world," which sparked



01. Jean's MI girlfriend (and future wife), Suzanne "Leigh" Limberg Mason '65.

02. Jean spent eight years at Country Day School and participated in *Troubadours* and *Literary Review*, among other activities.

03. As a member of the Codasco football team, Mason was known as "a strong offensive end with good hands. A great kicker."

04. Jean Mason with the CDS Signet Society.

an interest to become a copywriter. He sent samples of his writing—theoretical advertisements he had created—around and kept receiving the same reply: "Good to hear from you, but come back and talk to us once you have some real experience."

Then he read a story in *Sports Illustrated* about a new company called NFL Films, which was owned by the National Football League. "I wrote them a cocky letter and got a callback, went to New York for an interview, and was hired right away," he said. "I found out years later that the way they made their hiring decisions was based on how people wrote. Film making is visual writing. If you can write a few good paragraphs, you can put together a few minutes of a film because it's essentially the same thing."

His position with NFL Films allowed him to work as a producer, director, writer, editor, and camera operator. "I shot all of the super slow-motion footage for many

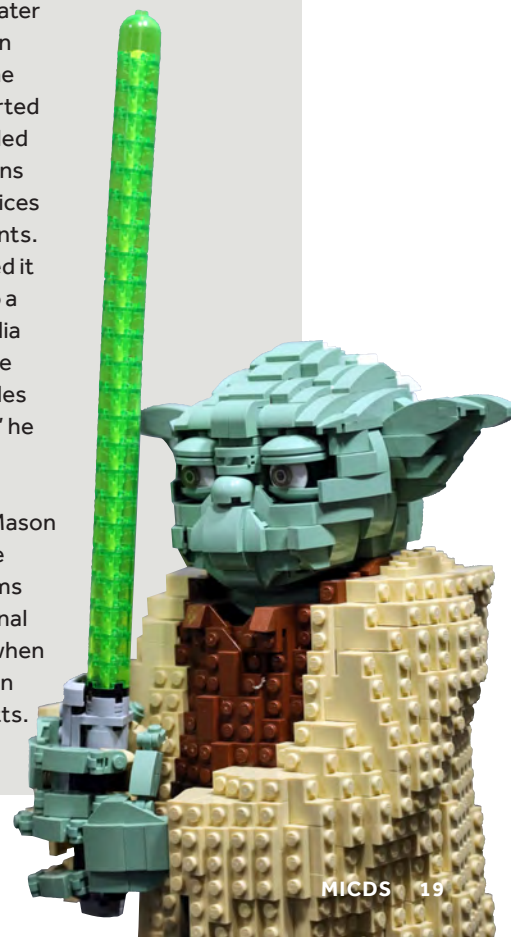
years," he said. Although he was based in Philadelphia, the work took him all around the country every Sunday of football season. After 11 years at NFL Films, nine of those on the road, he grew tired of the routine. The local public television station WHYY and NPR affiliate radio station had a change in management, and Mason jumped at the opportunity to make a change himself. Then, two years later, he was ready to change again.

It was 1981, and Mason put his experience to work at his own company, the newly-founded Modern Video Productions. The company worked mostly on post-production for television, primarily on commercials, but also completed a fair number of television programs including *La Bohème*, which won Emmy and other awards for the Opera Company of Philadelphia. (That work heightened an interest in opera that Mason nurtures to this day.)

In the very early days of home video, Mason spotted an opportunity. "There were two companies in

the entire country making copies of movies to get into Blockbuster and places like that, for people to watch at home," he said. "It seemed like a business that would explode." He wagered there was room in the market for a third company, and jumped on new technology Sony was developing that allowed high-speed duplicating of videotapes. He founded a company called High Speed Video which made millions of copies of movies and later opened a sister operation in Europe. Even though he had his hands full, he started yet another business called Modern Audio Productions that provided audio services for his video and film clients. In the late 80s, he bundled it all together and sold it to a fast-growing British media company. "Since then I've been doing Sudoku puzzles and building with Legos," he joked.

A private investor now, Mason has plenty of time to give back. He served two terms on the MICDS International Board of Visitors (BOV) when he and Leigh were living in Florida and Massachusetts.





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JEAN MASON '64

“It was a great chance to come back twice a year and see people on the board you had gotten to know or maybe had known before. Many became new friends,” he said. “It was a terrific experience, and a great reawakening of a relationship with the School that had gone dormant because we spent very little time in St. Louis for 35 years or so.” His first year on the BOV coincided with the opening of the McDonnell Athletic Center (MAC). He was suitably impressed by its size. “It offered a chance to see, like all of us who have gotten older over the years, how this school has grown many ways, just as we have grown. We left school, got married, became parents, had careers, and the school has morphed. Every few years it’s a little different. I’m amazed that it’s the same number of grades and how big and diverse it is, in all the good ways.”

Eventually, the Masons returned to St. Louis for good to be closer to their daughter, Liza. He loves to spend time with his three grandchildren, and while two of them are driving now, he used to take

them to school and pick them up, make them breakfast, and just hang out. His fitness routine was upended with the pandemic, so his preferred form of exercise now is long walks, frequently involving a spin or two around the MICDS track. The Mason’s son, Charlie, lives in Austin, Texas, and, like his father, has dabbled in a variety of careers, including film production.

As pandemic restrictions lightened up in late 2021, Mason unveiled to a select group of friends and family what had kept him busy during lockdown. A special invitation was sent, cryptic in its content. “I just billed it as ‘a major event,’” Mason said. That “major event” was a world of Lego, many of the creations he has assembled over a decade. There were

so many that he had to move them to Liza’s basement, where he then set them up in a series of galleries with various themes. His interest in Lego began years ago, he thinks when his grandchildren were little. “It fed my insatiable desire to sort,” he said. “I loved hand-collating papers back in the days before a copy machine could do it for you. It’s just the way my mind works.”

He gets his Lego kits online and from a local Lego store, and many of the kits he’s constructed aren’t available anymore. One of the larger kits he’s assembled is the Hogwarts castle from Harry Potter, which has 6,020



pieces. It took him roughly 15 hours, doing about an hour at a time each day. He notes that Lego directions don't have words, only pictures. Even a seasoned Lego assembler like Mason sometimes makes mistakes. "What I've learned from Lego is to follow directions. I know I was told many times at CDS to follow the directions, and I wasn't so good then but I've learned now with Legos you better follow directions or you're going to get an hour down the road and discover, 'Oops, that's all wrong,' and you have to go back and rebuild."

His completed Lego sets include the Taj Mahal and the Eiffel Tower, the sets of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, cars and ships and tractors, working roller coasters and Ferris wheels, and much more. He has also constructed a large container ship that is about eight feet long that he designed himself. Mason likes to travel on container ships, so this was a natural choice for a self-designed project.

For years he enjoyed the "totally uncluttered" way of traveling by container ship. While he had access to almost the entire ship, including the bridge morning and night, he was also responsible for bringing his own entertainment—something to fill the time of a 14-day or three-week trip. He was often the only passenger, although several times he took friends and twice he went with his twin brother. Leigh didn't mind. "She thought it was just terrific! She was playing bridge and doing her own thing so it was fine for me to disappear for three weeks." He says if you're a self-starter, it's a wonderful way to travel. There are very few rules, although you must do as the captain says. Mason spent his days reading, solving Sudoku puzzles, watching DVDs



and pre-recorded television programs, and walking the decks. "It's a great way to pass the time," he said.

He and Leigh also enjoy more conventional cruises, often taking their children and grandchildren. "It's a very self-contained way to do a lot of things and see different places, and it's enjoyable."

When he's not roaming the world or building Lego sets or making breakfast for his grandchildren or shuttling them around, Mason likes to go to the movies. As with the rest of his life, though, this is not an average hobby. "I was in a movie contest with a guy for close to 40 years: who could see the most movies," he said. "You have to buy a ticket and go to a theater you have to stay awake for at least half. He beat me badly for 19 years, and then I just crushed him. Up until COVID, I averaged 321 movies a year for 12 straight years. That's a lot of movies. Most of them are just garbage. There may be 20 a year that are really good and of that 20 there are ten that are really really good, and two or three are gems. Most are dreadful but they have interesting photography, writing, costumes, lighting, or whatever."

He's watching far fewer movies at theaters these days—the pandemic derailed that hobby—but the Legos keep him busy, and once a week or so he's on campus to walk the track. "It's amazing," he said. "I sometimes park at the MAC parking lot and walk up the hill to the old football stadium, past all the fields. It's still the same place, bigger, but still the same place." He thought for a moment about any lessons

he learned at CDS that he's carried throughout his life. "Respect for your fellow human beings," he said. He loves being around children, often stopping a parent pushing a stroller to say hello. "If I had to live my life again, maybe I would teach."

Perhaps we'll keep this in mind, and pull him into a classroom the next time we see him perambulating around campus. He certainly has a wealth of life experiences to share.

