

# Jo Keefe

Recollection by Richard Selby, London AFOLs organizer, Feb 2021



*Jo Keefe at the LEGO House of Dots, January 2020. Picture by Michael Studman.*

I met Jo at the Pick-A-Brick wall, at the back of the Stratford Lego store in the Spring of 2013. We got chatting over a PAB cup. I quickly realized here was a fellow AFOL and invited her along to London AFOLs, which back then was a small group of people huddled around one table in the Princess Louise pub in Holborn. Jo came along to the next meetup and carried on coming all the way until the end of 2019. She was one of our first and most regular members. At Meetups, she was friendly and cheerful, and was welcoming to new members. She was a quick and competent builder, and her mini-builds often impressed. Over the years, she introduced several of her friends to Meetup, including Jeanette and Tanya. It turned out she met them whilst shopping for Lego too.

She lived near me in east London. After a meetup, we would usually take the Victoria Line tube back to Walthamstow together. From there, I would walk her home or wait with her for the bus to her house. Over the years, we became friends. She also got along well with my wife, Aisling. Sometimes she would come round and join us for a meal or just to spend the afternoon in the garden.

Jo helped out with Lego shows, mainly the ones local to her in east London, either the E17 Art Trail show organized by me or the Wanstead Festival show organized by Lee McGinty. Although she was never an exhibitor, she would come early to help set up. During the shows, she would often man the door, unless someone came along with a pet dog in which case she would run and hide.

Jo provided important practical help to London AFOLs. Every year, we received a big shipment of sets from Lego HQ in Billund which had to last the year. She generously let us store the group's sets in her basement. Gaining entry to the basement was not easy. You had to descend a steep rickety ladder into a damp basement with a low ceiling, so low that standing up was impossible. It was a 2 person job to get the sets up and down, so I became one of the few visitors allowed to her house in Walthamstow. I never got to see anything of it other than the hallway, basement or garden. However, it was pretty obvious she was a hoarder of Lego and more.

London AFOLs became an important part of her life. Her birthday, 13 June, was close to our June meetup date. She often chose to celebrate her birthdays with us at the Meetup. She died just before her 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

Outside of the Lego world, she studied Mathematics at Oxford. She specialized in a branch of Maths called Operational Research (OR) and spent her entire career in the Civil Service. She very much enjoyed her job, and when she wasn't talking about Lego, she would tell about whatever problem she was working on. For a period she was a director of the Operational Research Society, the professional body. The two interests came together when she borrowed the clubs stock of plain 2 x 4 Lego bricks for an OR training day. She was held in high regard by her OR colleagues, who raised £1700 in her memory and donated the money to Fairy Bricks.

When things didn't go so well at work, it had a big knock-on effect on her life in general. In 2017, she transferred from one civil service department to another. It didn't work out, she was thoroughly miserable and she stopped coming to Meetups for a while. However, she eventually succeeded in reversing the transfer and things picked up again.

I can't recall Jo without thinking of some of her quirks. She had plenty of eccentricities which no doubt were in some way linked to her autism.

She liked to dress up. Sometimes I would come to move Lego sets in her basement, and she would open the door dressed as a devil, or a witch, or with a pair of wings attached to her back.

Despite the fact she worked with computers and was fluent in several programming languages, she detested the way many aspects of life were shifting online. For example, she refused to use a debit card and took out all her spending money for the week in cash over the counter. This became increasingly difficult during lock down, and was a cause of great stress for her. It also meant online shopping was not a possibility. She had coping strategies. During LUGbulk, for example, someone else would buy bricks on her behalf and she would pay them in cash.

Jo commuted every day to her office in Whitehall. She refused to use an Oyster card but she was happy to use a paper Travelcard. One day, when TfL installed new ticket barriers at her local station of St James Street, she was dismayed to realise there was no slot to insert a paper ticket in the new gates. She complained to TfL who suggested two options – either show the paper ticket to the guard who would then open the gates for her, or load her Travelcard onto an Oyster card like everyone else. She was having none of that. Instead she travelled one stop further north to Walthamstow, where she could use her paper ticket, and either walked or took the bus back home.

Boy, did she make good use of that paper Travelcard of hers. At the weekends, she would embark on an exhausting tour of Lego stores and other toy shops all over London in search of bargains. She would start in Walthamstow, travel to Croydon, then on to Shepherd's Bush, then to Stratford before heading home. Every step of the route would be worked out in advance. She would return home laden with cut-price toy bargains, mostly but not exclusively Lego, which she would somehow fit inside her already-packed house.

She did not travel internationally. She took a perverse pride in explaining how she didn't own a current passport and had no interest in going abroad. There was just one exception. She left the country just once (before I met her) to visit the Lego HQ in Billund, Denmark and join the exclusive Inside Tour for AFOLs. She had very fond memories of the tour.

Despite being a London AFOLs regular for 6 years, she never officially joined the group. She refused to enter her details via Meetup, as indeed she refused to participate in any kind of social media. Instead, I had to remember to forward Meetup invitations to her work email account, or call her up on her land line. Sadly, she maintained this refusal to engage in social media until the end. I tried in vain to persuade her to join our Zoom meetings, but she insisted this was never going to happen.

Even before Covid, the last few months of her life were difficult. There was an ongoing protest by Extinction Rebellion members outside her office in Whitehall. This affected her route in and out of the building, as well as disrupting the bus route she usually took from work to the Square Tavern pub, where we used to meet up. She gave that as a reason why she could no longer come to Meetups.

The final meetup she attended was December 2019. Perhaps Extinction Rebellion had called off the protest by then. Unfortunately, the Meetup was not without incident. Every year, Jo used to sell raffle tickets for the Xmas raffle, sometimes dressed in an elf outfit. In 2019, I announced a small change to how we would draw the raffle. She was not at all happy and stormed out. I now realise this was more about another unwelcome unplanned change in her life, rather than an objection to the change itself.

We saw her briefly at the start of 2020, when she joined us for the Lego House of Dots launch. She didn't seem her usual self, but posed for a group photo and the picture at the top of this article.

During the first Covid lockdown, Aisling and I kept in touch by phone. Although she found the disruption terribly tough at the start, we thought she had come to an arrangement which she was comfortable with, i.e. getting special dispensation to work in the office rather than from home. Sadly, we all know what happened next.

When somebody takes their own life, the manner of their demise can overshadow their life. I would like to remember Jo as she was before her environment spun out of control towards the latter half of 2019. She was cheerful and friendly. She dressed in bright colours and prints which matched her sunny personality. She was easy to talk to. When she talked, she was very well spoken and had a lovely clear voice. She was a solid and reliable part of our AFOL community, choosing to help out where she could. She knew herself well, but was also aware how she came across to others. She was happy to patiently explain her take on the world to anyone who was prepared to listen.