



MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH

Brian Korte used 41,490 small Lego pieces to make a three-part mosaic representing the Richmond skyline.

Piece by piece



This guy does what for a living?

Brian Korte designs photo mosaics with tiny square Lego bricks, each about the size of an aspirin. His company is called Brickworkz.

- **Founded:** January
- **Where:** His art hangs in a law and dentist office, and he can be commissioned to create most any picture. Legally, he cannot officially use the name "Lego," the reason he refers to the tiny pieces as "bricks."
- **Price:** Varies depending upon the complexity of the artwork, but starts at \$650
- **Web site:** www.Brickworkz.com

A Henrico artist refuses to let go of his love of Legos; the result is a business that's a work of art

BY JEFFREY KELLEY
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Brian Korte found a creative way to emerge from what many Lego lovers call "The Dark Ages." It's that time when a kid stops playing with those cool interlocking building blocks, makes a solid crack at becoming a grown-up in high school or college, then sometime thereafter realizes that they are, truly, a kid at heart.

When Korte revisited his affection for Legos a few years ago, the self-employed technology consultant — and self-pegged technology geek — had abruptly created a viable income building photo mosaics out of aspirin-sized square blocks.

"It was never 'not cool' to play Legos," says Korte, a jolly 28-year-old with a fondness for Walt Disney, TiVo and travel. "They just stayed in my closet for a long time."

His modern designs are the basis of the Henrico County company he calls Brickworkz LLC. The business represents the junction of Korte's fortes: computers and art.

"It's everything I like to do, and I get paid for it," the 2000 Radford University grad said. "I can make my own hours and choose my clients. It's like an ideal job."

That job traces its beginnings to 2004, when Korte was faced with the common 20-something decision of what to buy his friends for their wedding.

Pals planned to pitch in and buy the couple a camcorder. Korte wanted to give something more original, something to capture the happy pair's modern, eclectic art tastes.

So he grabbed a photograph of the twosome, bought more than 10,000 tiny Legos and hand built an exact reproduction of the image — completely in little plastic bricks.



Korte's mosaics start with a basic digital photograph. It could be a baby, a building, a flower or even SpongeBob SquarePants.

With photo-editing software, Korte converts the image into a picture that looks as though it was snapped with a low-quality digital camera — very grainy, so that smooth lines of a face or object become squared off, or pixelated.

While considered substandard by a photographer, the image is perfect for Lego-mosaic making. The pixels outline where to place Lego blocks, much like a paint-by-numbers — or in this case, a build-by-pixels.

It takes Korte hours measured in days to create the mosaics.

Once finished, his work can hang in office lobbies, above fireplaces or anywhere else art normally dangles.

It was only after his friends' wedding that a business materialized. After the ceremony, Korte began dabbling with more brick pics. He



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Legos

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took 13,824 Legos and recreated a self-portrait of himself standing beside his Toyota Corolla on the side of a highway in Wisconsin, part of a journey across America he made a few years ago.

In December, Korte was told that walls of the now-closed gallery spaces of downtown's C3 needed art for the summer.

"Go ahead and put me down," Korte remembers telling an employee at the creative worker space.

To prep for the C3 show, Korte established the company with the state. Then it was time to build.

And build.

"I built and built and built for months," Korte said, while still managing his IT business.

Supplying/bartering friends with Papa John's pizzas, Korte held parties where buddies would do the easy grunt work — mostly filling in his outlines with blocks.

Korte created 12 mosaics for the June and July C3 showcase. All told, he used between 140,000 and 150,000 blocks.

Francis Gary Powers Jr. visited the C3 display over the summer.

"I was impressed with what I saw. It's a cool medium," said Powers, founder of the Cold War Museum, an online compilation of history from the era.

Powers commissioned Korte to create the museum's logo — a red and blue circle with the black out-



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line of a U-2 spy plane — with 20,736 bricks. Powers' father's U-2 was shot down 46 years ago over the Soviet Union.

The nearly completed art will hang in Gallery5 in Richmond during a Russian art exhibit next month. Afterward, Powers will hang the piece in the Lorton-based museum he plans to open.

Korte also made a three-part mosaic montage of the Richmond skyline, incorporating scenes from Maymont park, the city's

row houses and the Arthur Ashe, Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis memorials.

Though that 41,490-piece project hangs above a sofa in Korte's photograph-filled apartment, it's for sale.

"How much? I don't know," Korte said. To gain a name, he said, he's been underselling the pieces starting around \$650.

One of them is a pair of lips and teeth called "Smile," which hangs in a local dentist office. "Pixel

Francis Gary Powers Jr., founder of the Cold War Museum, commissioned Brian Korte to create the museum's logo with 20,736 bricks. The art will hang in Gallery5 in Richmond during a Russian art exhibit next month.

Kiss," based on a work by contemporary artist Roy Lichtenstein, hangs in a law firm here.

Korte plans to bring on a few employees soon to keep up with rising demand for his brick art.

"The more jobs I take on, the less time I have to do them. And it takes time to do design these things," he said. "It is tedious, but it's a lot of fun."

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