



the business of



by Jocelyn Eikenburg

Phyllis Brody provides that rare opportunity to say “avant-garde” and “entrepreneur” in the same sentence. Wooden giraffe earrings dangle playfully from her ears, belying the fact that she and her friend Evelyn Greenwald revolutionized the toy industry. Her gleeful elementary school photo graces Creativity for Kids products and marketing materials. And when asked about the inspiration for her one-of-a-kind business, she doesn’t talk turkey—but rather of the “turkey syndrome.”

“The kids would put their hands down, trace around their fingers, add a few little bits of paper, and they had turkeys,” Brody explains. “When you went to open house or parents night, there were 30 turkeys up on the wall, and we thought ‘No, that’s not exactly what creativity is all about.’”

Brody should know creativity. She’s placed it front and center in Creativity for Kids, the successful business she co-founded with Greenwald in 1976. To this day, the whimsical line of more than 158 award-winning toys—with names such as the Wee Enchanted Garden and Le Most Cute Objects—still inspires young minds to think outside the box. That’s been the greatest payoff for Brody. “Any opportunity to see kids or, for that matter, anyone create, re-inspires.”

It’s no stretch to say that art and creativity have been Brody’s lifelong passions. While growing up in Brooklyn, New York, she attended art classes at the renowned Pratt Institute on Saturday mornings. Even as a psychology major at Brooklyn College, she continued to



creativity



Brody's desk is a jumble of fun.

nurture her artistic side, enrolling in studio art courses and teaching arts and crafts to children at the Henry Street Settlement on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Surprisingly, it wasn't art that initially landed her in Cleveland. Brody moved here to pursue a master's degree in social work from Case Western Reserve University. Yet art and creativity resurfaced in the course of her life, even as she settled down with husband Ralph and started raising a son and daughter. That's when she met Evelyn Greenwald, her future business partner.

The two served as assistants in their children's first-grade classroom in Cleveland Heights, bringing in artists to work with the teachers. "We would see this amazing transformation occur when children were given simple

materials and very few instructions—just have fun creating," says Brody. "We thought this was pretty powerful stuff and we should do something about it."

A deceptively simple idea, yet groundbreaking at the time. "[In 1976 this] was pretty unique," Brody points out. "Children didn't have these kinds of experiences unless they happened to be in a creative home." Meanwhile, the women already had a product in mind. Brody and Greenwald dabbled in assembling do-it-yourself creativity kits—made



no business experience whatsoever were starting a company," says Brody, "and we had an outpouring of support from business people who seemed to take a special interest in our development."

What began in basements and dining rooms in Cleveland Heights has become a company with more than 70 employees, an 88,200-square-foot distribution center, an international brand and high-profile clients such as Target, Borders and Jo-Ann Fabrics.

Brody owes a lot to Cleveland. "I think Cleveland is the right-sized city for [our business] because you have all of the infrastructure you need ... but it's not so big that you're lost in whatever the issues are: traffic, difficulty getting around, high rents." And she hopes to return the favor. A 1995 visit from former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich—who presented the company with a Corporate Citizenship Award from President Clinton—is just one way the company is quietly raising the profile of Northeast Ohio. "If more people knew that our company was from Cleveland, it would just add to the reputation of [the city] as being an interesting place."

Now Brody has discovered the apotheosis of her ideas: creativity across borders. "I have total confidence I could go anywhere and do this and would get the same basic result."

And she has. Brody accompanied her husband on a trip to Egypt with a suitcase brimming with Creativity for Kids components, just to hold a two-day children's workshop in Cairo. "We were already at war in Iraq, so I was a little bit

with hardware-store paints, feathers and scrap wood—as birthday presents for relatives' and friends' children.

What these women didn't know at the time was business. Terminology that came naturally to most entrepreneurs—such as bill of lading and gross—presented a challenge to the pair. But they were never without a healthy dose of persistence and a helping hand. "In the early days, we found that people were ... intrigued that two women with





worried about how people would react to me," Brody says. "And I think there were some boys who were a little bit standoffish in the beginning. But they were the ones who did these fantastic pastel drawings, and some of them worked on it for two hours."

In Kenya, Brody enchanted young audiences long after the toys disappeared. "They were learning sewing, and on the floor were little scraps of fabric. So I showed them how to take these little scraps of fabric and make [yo-yos], and they just fell in love with it."

Call Brody an ambassador for creativity, an entrepreneur or even just avant-garde. But one thing is certain—her profound legacy: "the tremendous importance of creativity ... [and] how it's becoming more and more a part of people's lives. That I've had a role in that, a tiny role, is very gratifying."



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