

No age limit

Toy stores focus on nostalgia and mystery to appeal to a broader clientele



BY MARY WANSEER

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Typically, once children become teenagers, they are too cool for toys. But **Sarah Evers**, co-owner of Dancing Bear Toys on Kenilworth Road in East Asheville, has noticed many college-age to 30-year-olds coming in to shop this year. She believes the industry's trending surprise packs — items that are packaged in capsules that conceal the contents upon purchase and include popular items such as glow-in-the-dark Smiskis, Smashers dinosaurs, Sonny Angel cherubs and other collector items — are luring young adults back into a business they previously thought they had outgrown: toy stores.

Others, such as **Orlando Hernandez Jr.**, co-owner of Curio in downtown Asheville, thinks in broader terms. “Everyone loves a toy store,” he says. “Someone who is older might see something they used to play with as a child, and it takes them back to their youth.”

Lite-Brite, Spirograph and yo-yos are some of the classic, nostalgic playthings that Curio and other independent stores in town carry. As Curio's tagline says, the shop is “for the cute and curious.” And being so has no age limit.

That trend extends to West Asheville. “We definitely serve all ages here,” says **Kait Zinnecker**, manager at Sparky's Toys & Gifts on Haywood Road. What delights her most is when older people walk into Sparky's, assume it's only for kids and then discover games, puzzles and crafts for adults.

Meanwhile, in Hendersonville, O.P. Taylor's on Main Street markets itself as “the coolest toy store on the planet” and carries items for newborns on up. One of its regular customers is an 80-plus-year-old who has become a Lego buff.

Legos are popular in East Asheville as well. Evers stocks kits in her shop from floor to ceiling. Inventory includes black box sets aimed at those 18 and older. The packaging, she explains, is more sophisticated, the brick counts greater and the buildable designs more intricate than classic children's sets.

Along with an all-ages clientele, local toy shop employees and owners say the industry has plenty of other surprises. From unusual peak seasons to unique marketing techniques, shopkeepers say in order to stay in business, they have to keep on top of trends and a whole slew of other considerations.



PLAYTIME: Sarah Evers, left, co-owner of Dancing Bear Toys, poses with her staff. She says most toy stores “do half their business in the fourth quarter ... particularly in December.” Photo by Thomas Calder

EBB AND FLOW

Just as toys aren't only for children, they aren't only for Christmas, either.

“In general, toy stores do half of their business in the fourth quarter ... particularly in December. That's the industry standard,” says Evers.

And yet, these independent toy stores of Western North Carolina don't let seasons stipulate their sales. Year-round is toy season, they say.

“Summer is almost as busy as Christmas,” explains **Katrina Butterick**, an employee at O.P. Taylor's. Along with its Hendersonville location, the shop has two additional spots in Greenville, S.C., and Brevard (its original store).

Speaking on behalf of the Hendersonville shop, Butterick attributes the bustling summertime sales to nearby camp activity.

Similarly for Sparky's, holiday time is its No. 1 season, with summer coming in second. Third, according to Zinnecker, is Asheville's leaf season. The ebbs and flows in toy sales, she and others say, are related to tourism.

One way Evers balances sales throughout the year is by offering a

birthday club that gives participants special discounts. Because there is no age limit, some members who were signed up by their parents are adults now, still in the club and signing up their own children.

Overall, for these independent toy shops, local folks come in with stable regularity. It's tourists, though, who create the peaks in business.

ALL AROUND THE WORLD

“In Asheville, people take shopping locally very serious, and they do it throughout the year. We are sustained by our locals,” Evers says.

And yet, Dancing Bear also sees visitors from all over the world.

Likewise, Zinnecker estimates that half of Sparky's customers are tourists. The shop serves several West Asheville families, too, with many who homeschool or unschool their children. For this reason, educational items are a large part of the inventory — children's books, globes, flash cards and more.

Visitors are also a significant portion of O.P. Taylor's sales. “We have a lot of people come in who have retired in the area that are our more regular

shoppers. But we also have a huge tourist presence here,” says Butterick.

Between annual visits, O.P. Taylor's keeps in contact with regular out-of-town clients via its website, which offers online shopping.

Nowadays, shopkeepers say, a web presence is essential for any type of retail business. But the toy industry wouldn't be as special as it is if it weren't for having at least one physical location for customers to visit.

LOCATION AND OUTREACH

“This location has been ideal,” says Evers in discussing Dancing Bear's Kenilworth Road site.

Though the shop is not on a main road, it gets an incredible amount of street exposure from the facing gas station and an array of hotels nearby. Advertising that it has tons of parking and is fully wheelchair-accessible helps with marketing as well.

But while ample parking may be a drawing card for some local toy stores, others, such as Curio, thrive on foot traffic. “We're busy when Asheville is busy, and Asheville stays pretty busy,” says Hernandez.

O.P. Taylor's in Hendersonville also relies on foot traffic. But that does not hinder visitors. Benefits to the downtown location include multiple street festivals and parades that attract crowds.

Sparky's does most of its marketing by word-of-mouth, but many of its visitors are tourists walking along Haywood, attracted to the shop's fun window paintings.

And despite recent reports of rising crime in Asheville, Evers at Dancing Bear says the store has seen no negative effect on sales, and she has spoken with associates who own a variety of downtown businesses who say the same thing.

Zinnecker at Sparky's agrees. "Theft is always something to be aware of and to be cautious about," she says, but this has not dampened business.

Nor has it dampened the spirit of those in the industry. Shopkeepers say they strive to make a positive impact on the community through neighborhood support. At Sparky's, toys rule, and love wins: That's its motto. Throughout the year, the store donates to local schools and families in need. And at holiday time, it partners with other organizations for toy drives.

Dancing Bear Toys also does community outreach by offering free play days throughout the year. Sometimes, a mascot comes to read a story to children and stays afterward for photos. Once, Evers and staff turned the store into Hogwarts, the fictional school in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Other play days are less elaborate, such as Pokémon Trading Card Day and Yo-Yo Share-A-Trick Day. But all are free and interactive.

HAPPY VIBES ACROSS THE BOARD

Just as shopping in a toy store can captivate an adult, so can working in one.

"There's definitely a psychological impact, where people are much happier coming in and being here," says Zinnecker, who holds two science degrees but chooses to work in the toy industry.

Evers has been in the toy business since 1991, when at 19 she began working for the original owner of Dancing Bear. Two years later, she, her sister and their parents bought the business.

Butterick has been with O.P. Taylor's for 15 years.

Perhaps it's the positive impact the toy industry has on the psyche that evokes the amiability among local, independent shops. Referrals to other stores are common if a product is out of stock or not carried by one store.

"We'll even take the extra step to call those stores," Zinnecker says, and ask if the customer's desired toy is available there.



STUFFY TIME: Katrina Butterick, a 15-year employee of O.P. Taylor's, says stuffed animals remain popular toys for young children. Photo by Mary Wanser

In fact, O.P. Taylor's Hendersonville site used to be Dancing Bear's second location. When the Evers family decided to consolidate into a single Asheville store, they were happy their Hendersonville storefront, where they'd been for 25 years, was taken over by Taylor's.

"Independently owned toy stores are, across the country, a community," says Butterick.

TACTILE EXPERIENCE

Given the popularity of online shopping, one might wonder how local, independent toy shops not only survive but thrive. How can they compete with an enterprise such as Amazon?

"If we tried to compete with Amazon, we wouldn't have a store," says Zinnecker.

Others in the industry agree. What local shopkeepers offer is an experience that is not an option when

sitting at home, ordering online and awaiting delivery.

Hernandez says that at Curio, employees strive to help people find the perfect toy. He is not alone. Any retail store can offer purchasing. But local toy shops offer much more with in-person engagement.

Dancing Bear's store is a former Hooters restaurant. What used to be the cocktail bar is now a toy bar, where customers can test and try out different items.

"They'd rather come to this curated environment and have tactile experiences," Zinnecker says, noting how important these are to Sparky's customers.

"All you can do is provide an experience. It's about touching it, being hands-on, having smiling faces greet you and want to help you," adds Butterick. "We're going to wrap it for you and put a homemade bow on it. Those are the reasons people still come to toy stores." ❌

Toy trends

Legos are one of the two most popular toys this year, according to local shopkeepers. And this is not a new trend. For quite a few years now, Legos have been a bestseller at multiple locations.

Stuffed animals and funky plush toys in shapes such as manta rays, octopi, banana slugs and butterflies are equally popular. This trend seems to have emerged since COVID-19, say toy shop owners. Jellycat is a prominent supplier, with a line of stuffed fruits and vegetables called Amuseables.

Speed Cubes are favorites this year, too. Similar to Rubik's Cubes, they

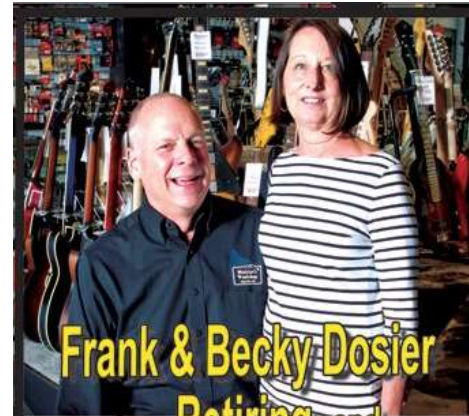
invite participants to compete at solving puzzles as quickly as possible.

Fidget toys are immensely popular as well, including slime and putty.

There's also a big *kawaii* trend. In Japanese, the word means "cute" or "tiny." Anything resembling this, even small stickers, are hot this year.

Additionally, say shop owners, Calico Critters are big sellers. These are miniature animal figurines that have homes, furniture and accessories.

Another critter-type toy that's trending is the Bitzee — a digital, touchable, holographic, pocket-sized pet. Some project this to be the toy of Christmas 2023. It's a technologically advanced version of the Tamagotchi, popular nearly three decades ago. ❌



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