



SHERIE NICKOL

Kidding around: Howard Wexler with his sons Jonathan (left) and David and his Blooming Dolls.

Top-of-the-line toy inventor

Making play of life's work

By CYNTHIA RIGG
CRAIN'S NEW YORK BUSINESS

Marilyn Wexler couldn't contain herself walking into the Toy Park store on the Upper East Side. Piled high in the center of the store were mounds of Funny Freddies—the fuzzy blue stuffed animal her husband, Howard, had created for Fisher-Price. "Look, David," she shouted as her four-year-old son ran directly to the display.

David then scooped up two balls lying on the floor, totally ignoring the heap of blue Freddies.

Rejection is just a daily occurrence when you're in the toy business, even when you're a top free-lance inventor like Howard Wexler.

Rather than being knocked down by countless rebuffs, Mr. Wexler shows an indefatigable desire to prove that he is as smart or smarter than his peers. Despite his success, he still hasn't let go of the insecure boy who grew up an undiagnosed dyslexic on the Lower East Side.

"No one company could absorb all the ideas I have coming," boasts Mr. Wexler, whose manner and looks belie his 50 years. "It doesn't matter if you know how to spell. I have a secretary to do that now. All you need to be an inventor is a good mind."

With 40 toys currently on the market, including perennial favorite Connect Four, Mr. Wexler is on the toy all-star team. Each year when Hasbro, Fisher-Price and Mattel go shopping for new ideas, they make a visit to Mr. Wexler's midtown office, housed in the same doorman building where he lives with his wife and two young sons.

"Howard is one of the young, bright, creative minds in the business," says Len Sausen, senior vice president-marketing and sales at Colorforms, who has known Mr. Wexler for years. "He's both prolific and persistent."

Mr. Wexler doesn't quite resemble the profile of a Gepetto laboring at his workbench, creating the next Pinocchio. The trim toy inventor favors blue jeans, fine cotton shirts and imported loafers. Ideas keep tumbling out and his emotions come quickly to the surface. If he thinks he's been clever, he will tell you so. If you reject his idea, his feelings are wounded.

But he bounces back. "My ideas get rejected 95% of the time,"

(Continued on Page 33)

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Free-lance toy inventor makes play of life work

From Page 3

Mr. Wexler says. "You have to keep coming back. I don't think anyone knows when they have a winner."

He seems just as proud of a rejected action figure set called Silly Wars, where rivals fight with food weapons over the shape of hamburgers, as he does of the Wilson foam balls and Crimebusters card games he has sold.

As Mr. Wexler recalls growing up in a tenement on the Lower East Side, the only ambition he remembers was to follow his mother's admonitions to stay healthy. As an undiagnosed dyslexic he struggled through school, bluffing his way through reading and spelling. His involvement with sports led him to attend City College with plans of becoming a physical education teacher.

"I knew that I was smart; I just couldn't read or write," recalls Mr. Wexler in his characteristically not-so-modest way. "I used my street smarts to get me through."

Mr. Wexler didn't end his academic pursuits until he earned a doctorate in psychology while working as a school psychologist. "But I felt like a fraud," he says. "How could this dumb kid be a doctor? Once I got my doctorate I started looking for something else to do."

An article about the psychology of toys led Mr. Wexler to create his first invention—a spy game based on Bill Cosby's "I Spy" television series. He was turned down everywhere.

"I was so naive. I didn't realize that toy companies had access at least a year earlier to television programming," Mr. Wexler admits.

Two-year stint with Hasbro

But he did eventually manage to win a staff job at Hasbro, working on a new line of developmental baby toys called "Your Baby." Two years later, in 1971, Mr. Wexler left to become a free-lance inventor, but not before gaining valuable experience about the manufacturing and marketing of toys.

"Howard tends to do his homework and is always looking to open up new niches," says George Dunsay, senior vice president-conceptual design and technology for Hasbro, which has purchased several of Mr. Wexler's designs. "He has good ideas and also understands the manufacturer's bottom line—what it takes to get a product out."

While a home run hit a la Trivial Pursuit has so far eluded Mr. Wexler, he has proved adept at playing the toy marketing game of the 1980s.

Royalties from his biggest seller, Milton Bradley's Connect Four, a vertical tic-tack-toe game, amount to almost \$4 million—averaging about \$250,000 a year. Added to the Connect Four payments are the 5% royalty fees he earns from products like 3-D Co-

lorforms and Binney & Smith games.

Mr. Wexler splits his royalties for Connect Four with Ned Strongen, another toy inventor. Mr. Wexler didn't have the \$5,000 to buy back his idea in the early Seventies, when he parted ways with Mr. Strongen after a yearlong affiliation. The lack of capital has already cost him \$4 million.

Lessons like that have toughened Mr. Wexler, helping him survive in a changing toy world.

Once the domain of individual inventors who sold their dreams to hundreds of companies, the toy world has become a marketing business dominated by a few huge corporations. Many of the remaining toy companies simply refuse to look at unsolicited ideas because of the fear of costly lawsuits.

In addition, the dominance of licensing has led to

more internal product development. And because advertising costs have skyrocketed, toy companies are much less interested in a single item, preferring to market extended product lines instead. The large toy companies usually aren't interested unless they believe a toy will bring in \$40 million to \$50 million in sales.

All of these factors have increased the importance of an inventor's ability to create products that not only entertain but fit into a company's marketing plan—something Mr. Wexler has proved very adept at.

A game of sniffing for gaps

Working with his team of elves/designers, Mr. Wexler looks for holes in toy companies' product lines. Like many other inventors, Mr. Wexler doesn't specialize in any particular area—except that he avoids electronics.

This year, for example, he has sold Blooming Dolls, a flowerpot/puppet/doll, as well as the One Million Dollar Chance of a Lifetime and the Pyramid Game board games and Funny Freddy.

The toy executives that Mr. Wexler deals with often find his need for approval an asset—not a liability.

"He has some insecurities that make him boastful," admits John Osher, whose Cleveland-based Cap Toys Inc. is marketing Blooming Dolls. "But he's a warmhearted guy who is a brilliant inventor."

Although Mr. Wexler is having his best year ever, having sold 20 items, he still voices insecurities about the business. The same restlessness that helps him conjure up money-making toys is taking him into new fields. In the middle of discussing his toy inventions, he asks if you care to read his autobiography, or maybe listen to one of the children's songs he has composed.

"Sometimes I worry that it doesn't seem quite adultish enough for me to be playing with dolls," he says. □ **CNYB**

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