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community

Kirkland mom sells handmade toys from India created with wood and vegetable dyes

by JORDAN LINDSTROM

Some girls have all the luck. Kirkland's Shankar family has two -- girls with all the good fortune, that is.

Two-year-old Tara Shankar might be the luckiest girl in her Houghton neighborhood. She has a whole room in her house just for toys. On a desk sit shiny green and red turtles with shells that spin when you pull. Whistles and rattles and noise makers of all kinds fill a bin in the corner. And centipedes and other fairy tale creatures that can be pulled apart or stacked dot a shelf on the wall.

Tara's mother, Deepti, is a toy seller -- and she keeps some inventory at home. She sells only wooden toys made with vegetable-based paint. With Gov. Gregoire signing into law last week legislation that gives Washington the strictest toy-safety standards in the nation, Deepti's start-up company, Earthentree, is perfectly positioned to take advantage of the new toy market.

Some girls, as Deepti is quick to acknowledge, have all the luck.

"It's a great thing for us," she said of the new toy standards. "Everyone's looking for toys that are safe that are more meaningful ... We started much before the lead scare, but the lead scare gave us a lucky break."

Deepti's Web-based company, which she runs out of her Kirkland home with her husband and daughter (the in-house toy tester), went online in January and already generates thousands of hits each month. The Shankar's expect to get at least 50,000 hits this summer, and that's before Google optimization.



Katherine Ganter/Reporter Newspapers

Deepti Shankar sells eco-friendly toys out of her Houghton neighborhood home.

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She's coy about how many toys she's selling, but admits her bigger concern is growing more slowly and manageably, not bringing in more customers. That's quick headway for a company that started as a chat between mothers in the Phyllis A. Needy Park.

Shortly after Tara was born, Deepti -- a native of India who came to the states to study art history in Chicago -- began taking her daughter to the park to play. Occasionally, she'd bring along small wooden play things from her home city of Channapatna, a city in southern India where the major trade is toys and the main job title is artisan. Each toy is specially handmade. The particular craft that produces Earthentree's toys is over 200 years old.

Deepti said the other mothers in her neighborhood marveled at how their toddlers took to the toys, which are made with a light weight and fine grained wood called "hale" and painted with vegetable and natural dyes. When some of her neighbors' kids didn't want to give back the toys, the mothers simply bought them from Deepti. Then they told their friends, and asked her to bring over more. She started selling them by the box.

Deepti (who had moved to the area on the memory of a postcard of Seattle and Mount Rainier she saw as a child) had started herself a business -- and she hadn't even tried. What could she do if she actually started selling on a bigger scale?

She traveled to India, established a relationship with the toy makers there and developed a whole line of trains, shakers and hooped stackers to match Earthentree's motto of "eco-friendly and fun."

"You can't just be a blind consumer anymore," she said. "We know exactly where all our toys come from and what goes in them."

That's a sentiment Deepti said she's happy to now see echoed in the state legislature, which responded to a scare over toxic substances in Chinese-made toys by passing strict toy-safety legislation. The new law requires toy manufacturers to meet more stringent standards of allowable levels of harmful substances like lead, cadmium and phthalates by July 1, 2009. It makes Washington the only state that requires toy makers to report any products made with such substances to the state Department of Ecology.

It also puts Earthentree, which sells toys at a



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higher-income range -- from about \$15 to \$40 -- in an ideal situation to take advantage of the new focus on safety. In 2000, the Channapatna artisans learned to use lacquer sticks of color (which they apply to spinning pieces of carved wood like a pottery maker might apply a finger to a wet piece of clay) created from organic substances. Yellow comes from tumeric powder, blue from extracts of the indigo plant, red from natural alizarin and dark brown from the ratanjyoti tree.

“Our favorite catch phrase is, ‘you get all your vegetable groups when you put one of our toys in your mouth,’” Deepti said.

And Earthentree’s success and the new focus on eco-friendly toys isn’t just good news for the Shankar family, but the Channapatna artisan community as well. Back in the late 1990s, the entire industry, which had focused solely on culturally specific toys and sold mainly in India, nearly went bankrupt. The Indian government stepped in and held workshops for toy makers, teaching them to create products with a more universal appeal. Since, Channapatna’s toys have found markets with sellers like Deepti, and the community is back on the rise.

“The concept of making a craft is something we’ve lost; working with our hands,” said Deepti, recalling a childhood in Channapatna spent comparing toys with her young friends. “Everything we sell has a story behind it because it’s handmade.”

Deepti’s quickly finding out, however, that the concept of buying a craft is something that’s yet to be forgotten. Outside of its word-of-mouth growth among local moms and at trade shows, Earthentree has found admirers in places like the Seattle Symphony, which sells the toys in its gift shop, and at museums and preschools around the country.

With so much early attention, the Shankars have had to set a plan for modest, manageable growth: an office by the end of the year; a diversification into adult products like bracelets, coasters and candle sticks soon thereafter; and a line of toy cars as soon as Deepti can set her mind to it.

For that, however, she might need to clear another room in her house and shop for another crib -- a blue one.

Some boys have all the luck.

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