

# In Ms. Brokaw's Business, The Prime Time Is Playtime

By Cindy Frenkel

The year after Penny Whistle Toys opened, Meredith Brokaw wrote an ad for a solar blimp that ran in *The New Yorker*. She, her husband, Tom, and their daughters had taken the blimp to Central Park to try it out; many people asked about it. The ad read, "When exposed to the sun, the solar airship takes off gradually. You'll have the only kite in the sky on windless days! At six foot long, two inches in diameter, it takes one person to fly it, one to tell the gathered crowd where to buy it!" Two ads for solar blimps were placed in the magazine during the autumn of 1979. Eleven weeks after the last one ran, 2,016 blimps had been sold and orders were still being placed. The ad helped put Penny Whistle Toys on the map.

Today, there are five branches of the toy store: three in Manhattan, one in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and one in Bridgehampton, L.I. The worst complaint to be heard about the store or Ms. Brokaw was from a competitor, who said: "I don't think she stocks as much Caran D'ache [imported crayons] as she used to."

When Ms. Brokaw opened Penny Whistle, neither she nor her partner, a friend named Mary Slawson, had worked in business before. "We flipped a coin for who would be president and vice president," Ms. Slawson recalled by phone from her home in San Francisco, where she now lives with her husband. "We flipped a coin for who would do the inventory and who would do the financials—hiring, firing and the books—and that's how we proceeded."

"I sold Girl Scout cookies when I was 10," Ms. Brokaw said. "I had no retail experience. Now I have tremendous respect for people in retail. Before, I taught high school English in Omaha, and later, English as a second language in Washington. I acted on an impulse but Mary and I spent a year studying how to open our own business before we actually did." Ms. Slawson sold her share in the business after she moved to California, in 1981. Even so, she returns to New York almost every year to attend the New York Toy Fair with her former partner.

These days Ms. Brokaw employs about 25 people, including a lot of part-time actors and actresses who, she explained, are good for business because they're so animated. She works, without a partner, in a brownstone next to the store at Madison Avenue and 9th Street, in a small office made cheerful by good light and bright rag rugs. At 47, she has short dark hair, clear blue eyes and a delicately chiseled face. Her job continues to change as the business grows. Nowadays she's generally not on the floor selling. Instead, she spends much of her time in the office working with suppliers, and she tries to visit each store during the week, to oversee details. She said this is part of "the fun of growing a business," a term from Smith & Hawken's Paul Hawken, who wrote "Growing a Business," a book she recommends to any would-be entrepreneur.

Ms. Brokaw's concern about the effect toys have on children is important to Penny Whistle's success. The purpose in starting the store was to seek out toys that were not only intrinsically durable but also sparked a child's imagination. "Europeans have fashioned toys with education in mind," she said, "but, with the exception of Fisher-Price, most American toy companies are totally involved with the profit motive of selling toys and not with the development of the child. They don't match up how a child relates to the toy. There's very little being done in research and development—except at Fisher-Price." Other companies, she said, market toys that "teach Rambo skills." If there is research being done on child development, the toys don't reflect it. "Their concern is to make something that will appeal to a child," she said. "And their reason is, whatever Saturday morning cartoons are selling."

In addition to operating the stores and raising three children, Ms. Brokaw devotes time to various causes. She's on the board of Gannett Company. She's chairman of the board of the New York Center of Coro, a nonprofit organization that provides

leadership training for qualified, motivated people interested in public service. She's a trustee of the National Home Library Board, a Washington-based foundation that awards grants to institutions for book-related purchases. She's on the board of visitors of the Peter F. Drucker Graduate Management Center at Claremont Graduate School. She also backpacks, skis, plays tennis and runs. (In 1978 she finished the New York City Marathon in the top third of the women entrants.) She has published one book ("The Penny Whistle Party Planner") and, with her coauthor, Annie Gilbar, is at work on a second, a lunchbox planner.

"I'm in awe of her," her husband, the NBC news anchorman, said. "Characteristically, there's nothing in her background that suggested she'd be so successful at this, yet on the other hand I've never seen her undertake something she hasn't been successful at."

Mr. Brokaw recalled the obstacles his wife encountered when she first went into business. "A lot of people thought it was an amusing diversion for her and they didn't take it seriously," he said. "People today think, 'Oh, your wife has a little bou-tique' and I describe it for them and they're a little amazed, as I am. It's double jeopardy. Being a woman and being married to me, people didn't believe she could have a life of her own. She's always been a

Penny Whistle's owner has "only enriched" his life. "It's great for the kids to have that kind of role model as a mother," he explained. "It's made me conscious of the pressures and demands of owning and operating a small business. I'm alert to the constraints, especially of people in those businesses in New York City. When I talk about the exchange rate on the nightly news I have a much keener appreciation of it because I know what Meredith is paying for foreign toys. It's not the only way I know, but it's a nice, homespun example."

The Brokaws' personal lives are as busy as their professional ones. Their oldest daughter just graduated from Stanford, the middle one is at the University of California in Berkeley and the youngest started at Duke this fall. Like any two-career couple with demanding jobs, they have to make time to see one another. "We have this deep personal commitment to each other," Mr. Brokaw said, "and we don't do any of these other things at the expense of that." During the week, the Brokaws live in an apartment on the Upper East Side; they spend weekends in a house in the northwest part of Connecticut.

Ms. Brokaw said Brio trains are her favorite toys. "They feed a child's imagination," she said. "The child propels the train, and has the options of arranging the track and town so it gives him some building and spatial relationships. They're appealing to 2-year-olds and to 8-year-olds. And I can't discount Lego and Playmobil." She said, however, that her favorite part of the business isn't the toys; it's feeling part of the neighborhood. For children, the hub of the neighborhood is the local toy store. "It's the only store kids feel belongs to them," she said.



The bubble-blowing teddy bear, above, is the emblem of Penny Whistle Toys. At right, Meredith Brokaw in the store at 132 Spring Street.

Photos by Lynn Tesia-Polite

