

Being in the business of people...and bears!

Danny and Barrie Shapiro of The Toy Shoppe in Richmond, Virginia have been running their rare toy business for over 40 years and every day is still a joy

BY LAUREN NIELSEN

Rare. This is the most common description of The Toy Shoppe, a business run by Danny and Barrie Shapiro in Richmond, Virginia. Since its beginnings in 1975, The Toy Shoppe has been anything but your typical toy store.



"Our staff are the friendliest people you will ever meet. They are often found in the warehouse taking time to choose a 'cheerful' or a 'loving' face for a customer. It makes a business special when the staff loves what they are doing. And how could you not? You

spend all day with teddy bears!"

Back in 1975, there was no market for fine, collectable teddy bears. "Having enjoyed the wonderful quality and characters of bears by Steiff and other European artists, we knew that many people in the USA would appreciate these fine toys, if only they were exposed to them," the Shapiros shared. "It became a joy to find and nurture teddy bear artists over the years, connecting them with people who loved their creations."

The business of people

Now in their 41st year of business, Danny and Barrie have kept this rare business going strong. While they are technically in the doll and teddy bear business, it can also be said that they are in the business of people. "What makes us special is our people," Danny said, "they are extraordinary."

The company is more like a family, "Everybody watches out for everybody," Barrie explained; "just one big family." The Shapiros have had employees with them for over 30 years, some even working into their 90s.

As a husband and wife team, Danny and Barrie love working together. "It just 100 percent works," said Barrie. "Being in business with, and being married to, your best friend - how many people can say that?"

The Toy Shoppe's extraordinary people aren't just limited to the Shapiros and their employees. Every day, The Toy Shoppe staff interact with artists and collectors from all over the world. "One of the true pleasures of this business is meeting teddy bear people around the world," Danny commented.

The Shapiros' business has taken them to shows and events around the world, including some of their own, hosting Steiff events and artists showings, all of which bring together enthusiasts from throughout the teddy bear and doll industries.

Being in the business of people is what makes The Toy Shoppe and its role in the industry special. "We care about what we purchase very much. We care very much about what our



customers buy from us," Danny told us.

"The market runs very simply from maker to creator through good retailers who are there to inform and educate about the project in an honest, objective way, based on what they're choosing to sell," he continued.

A core belief system

Their core belief system in what they sell is structured around three things: "Creativity and originality of design, quality of craftsmanship and quality of materials used."

When selecting an artist or a product to sell, Danny and Barrie look for items that "just make your imagination soar." These items come from artists with knowledge, experience, taste, originality, beautiful design and charm.

Their shop space also plays an important part in selling these collectable bears and dolls. The Toy Shoppe has maintained its current location for a long time. The entire facility spans about 10,000 square feet and is located in a business park. The Shapiros have consistently had a nice gallery space for their out of town visitors and local customers.

With their 40th anniversary came some changes to the shop - an expan-



sion of the showroom from 2200 to 3000 square feet of space. “This gives a lot more breathing space to everything,” Danny explained. “You need to be able to stand back from an object to view it. The response has been great and people really do like the way it looks.

“We care about our customers and want to take care of their needs. They become friends. It’s a really nice, warm feeling that develops between the collector and the shop and the makers as well.” This feeling and these connections create the magic of the shop.

Even throughout times of bad economy, changing demographics and evolving trends, The Toy Shoppe has managed to survive and thrive. Especially when the economy is poor. “People don’t feel as good about buying these beautiful objects and they don’t buy as much – they have to be more careful,” Danny told us. That is why informing and guiding the purchaser in the best possible way is the most important thing to us.”

The one thing that holds the collectable toy market together, Danny feels, is “the flow between creator, retailer and collector. It’s a flow you don’t want to break. That kind of glue is important





and you can't live without the centre." And The Toy Shoppe is that centre. "It's because of the collectors, the makers, that we're here."

Barrie added to her husband's statement: "It's about being a first-class place with first-class selections. What makes us different, I think, is the heart of it," she shared. "You can probably find anything you want but we are one of these rare places."

Heart and soul

The Toy Shoppe continues to be the largest authorised US dealer for Steiff, the largest US stockist for Charlie Bears, and R. John Wright's premier shop. "We are very proud to have earned those distinctions through our efforts with both the artists and manufacturers as well as our customers over the past 40 plus years, said Keith Grim, the Director of Marketing for The Toy Shoppe.

"Danny and Barrie have been the heart and soul of the shop since its inception," Keith added. "They both have very different feelings and approaches to things and it's amazing to me to see these two different approaches work so well together. They really complement each other."

So what do the Shapiros love most about teddy bears? "A teddy bear is truly a perfect toy. Both children and adults connect with them emotionally. They have character, provide companionship and fill a cherished spot

in our hearts. What really astounds us about the teddy bear is its longevity. After more than a century, this iconic toy remains amazingly popular."

And after more than forty years, so does The Toy Shoppe. As for the next forty years, "the goals are no different than they have been," said Danny. "I want a shop once we're gone. Run by people who care, honestly care, about what we're buying. I want them to care about what they are selling, the sole operating goal.

"We were never a fad shop," he continued. "It's all about people, markets. You can easily follow the market's rise, peak and dropdown, and those cycles tend to repeat themselves. It's just like people's lives. It's interesting for me to think about this – we knew what we believed in selling and we did that. There used to be hundreds of shops open and selling the latest fad, then the popular collectables market dropped off and those shops disappeared very quickly. They had nothing to offer."

"We survived," Danny stated, "That shows you the reality of what lasts and one of the reasons we've lasted for over 40 years. Rarity – that means something."



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