

Toy execs target Bergen County-born Colorforms for revival

FEBRUARY 17, 2015, 6:28 PM LAST UPDATED: TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2015, 6:40 PM

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George Vorkas, president of the Colorforms brand, is confident he can bring Colorforms back to the status of a beloved children's product.

Colorforms, the playset with vinyl stick-on shapes that was in every Baby Boomer's toy chest, was very much a Bergen County progeny.

Its creators, Harry and Patricia Kislevitz, assembled the earliest Colorforms kits in the basement of their River Edge home. In the 1980s and 1990s, Colorforms were made in a factory in Ramsey.

Since the late 1990s, as the first electronic toys, then video games, hand-held movie screens and, most recently, smartphones and iPads became the preferred playthings of most children, the appeal of Colorforms has faded. Now, three toy executives who also have Bergen County roots are trying to revive the brand.

And Patricia Kislevitz, co-creator of the original toy, 86 years old and still living in River Edge, is hoping they succeed.

"I'd love to see it fanned back to life a bit," she said. "It still has that ability to touch a child artistically."

Colorforms, born in 1951, was named one of the top 10 toys for the 20th century by the Toy Industry Association, and one of the top 100 toys of all time by Time magazine. Baby Boomers wax rhapsodic when reminiscing about them, recalling the distinctive smell of the vinyl, and the television shows in the 60s that had their own Colorforms boxed sets – Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop, Rocky and Bullwinkle, Batman, Gumby and others.

The challenge for the new owners of the brand, however, will be to sell it to children – and their parents – who were born after the Colorforms heyday.



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Marketing and license manager Meghan Burke displays some Colorform products in New York City Monday.

“It will have to be really strategically marketed – it’s not a common play pattern right now,” said Chris Byrne, a toy author, reviewer, and consultant known as “The Toy Guy” who included Colorforms in his book “Toy Time” as one of the most loved and influential toys of the past 50 years. “There are apps that do what Colorforms does – let you move figures and shapes around – but there is something to be said for the tactile play of Colorforms,” he said.

Out of the Blue Enterprises, a New York-based children’s entertainment company owned by Hillsdale native Samantha Freeman and Harrington Park native Angela Santomero, bought the Colorforms brand from the previous owner, University Games, in September for an undisclosed price, and hired Fort Lee native George Vorkas as president of the Colorforms brand.

The Kislevitz’s sold the company to Toy Biz in 1997, and Toy Biz moved production of the toys from Ramsey to Mexico. Toy Biz sold the brand a year later, to University Games, which sells board games and educational toys, mostly to specialty stores.

As soon as Out of the Blue sealed the purchase deal in September, Vorkas moved ahead on plans to secure new licensed properties for the brand, winning a Disney license that will allow the company to roll out Colorform sets featuring characters from the animated hit “Frozen,” as well as a licensing deal for Nickelodeon properties such as Dora the Explorer and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. The first Colorform sets produced by the new owners will arrive at Toys “R” Us and Party City stores in April, Vorkas said,

Colorforms were created when Harry Kislevitz, a fan of Russian abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky, was studying at the Art Students League in New York City, and experimenting with ways to move large painted shapes around on a surface.

Harry, who died in 2012, began looking for materials he could use in place of paint, and learned that a plastics company was making bolts of vinyl for pocketbooks that had a troubling property – the vinyl stuck fast to any shiny surface. The Kislevitz’s had the bolts delivered to their New York City railroad flat. Patricia painted the bathroom wall with a bright orange semi-gloss, and artist friends would play with the vinyl shapes in the bathroom. The couple decided to create playsets with the vinyl, using geometric shapes that children could place on a play board to make pictures and abstract designs.

After moving to River Edge in the early 50s, the Kislevitz’s assembled the early versions of Colorforms in their basement, later moving production to Englewood, then Norwood, and finally Ramsey, Patricia Kislevitz said.

At its sales peak in the 1980s, the company employed 300 people in Ramsey and had annual sales of \$20 million, according to a Record article from 1997.

The original version of Colorforms, with an assortment of geometric shapes, and sold in a black box, is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art and those sets are sold in its gift shop. Vintage sets featuring characters from old television shows, or music stars such as The Beatles are highly sought-after collectors’ items, selling for hundreds of dollars.

Out of the Blue Enterprises produces the popular children’s television shows Super Why and Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood, and the company was looking to move into toy lines as a way to expand. When it learned the Colorforms brand was available for sale, “it just felt like the right opportunity for us,” Freeman said. “The age target for Colorforms [3-plus] is very similar to that for our shows and we wanted to make a more physical, tangible product.”

Vorkas is confident he can bring Colorforms back to the status of a beloved children’s product. “There is a huge push-back of parents taking smart phones from the kids and trying to get them to do more tactile-type play,” he said.

But Vorkas, who tried pitching the revived Colorforms brand at Toy Fair at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York, acknowledged that he got the best response from toy retailer representatives in the Baby Boomer generation. Younger merchants, he said, “had no idea what Colorforms was.”

Sean McGowan, toy analyst for Needham & Co., said Colorforms has a solid brand and a proven play pattern, but that it may be tough to grow sales based on nostalgia for the brand. “It is iconic, but it is iconic to people my age; it’s not iconic to people in their twenties.”

But the new owners believe they can marry the classic board play of Colorforms with the digital age, and plan to launch an app that will allow kids to scan their Colorforms creations and animate them.

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Harry Kislevitz, who invented Colorforms with his wife Patricia, in the 1950s.