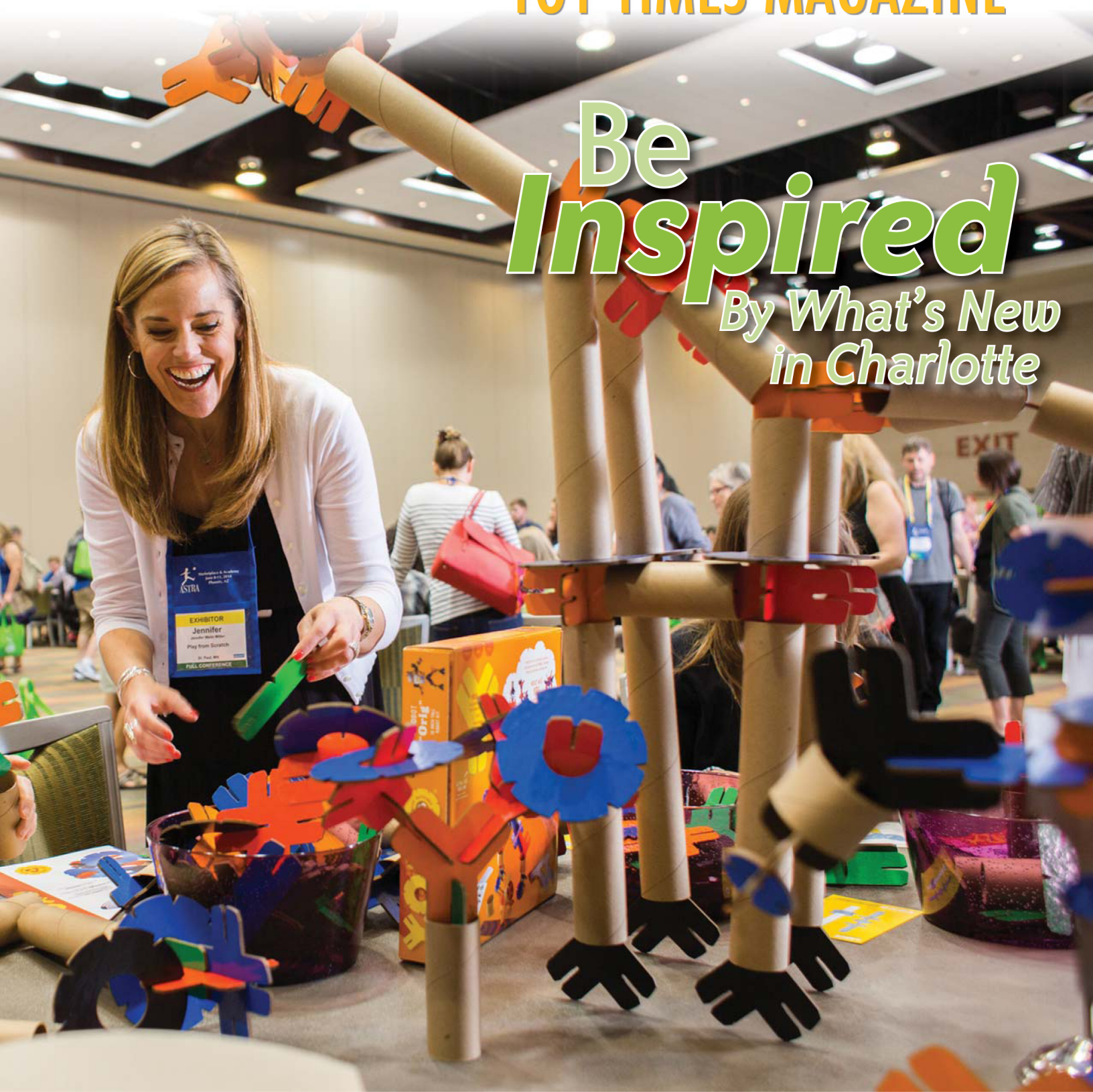




# ASTRA

## TOY TIMES MAGAZINE

Be  
*Inspired*  
By What's New  
in Charlotte





## Features

### MONEY MATTERS

- 10 To Sharpen Your Ad Writing Skills, Start With Some Legwork
- 12 Travel, Fun, and Tax Deductions

### TOY STORIES

- 14 In Business, Family Matters
- 20 Companies With a Conscience

### TRENDING NOW

- 25 Watch for These Movies – Your Customers Will Be
- 26 Moving Right Along
- 28 Update from the Technology Committee
- 30 Inspiring Lifelong Learning (And a Certificate to Prove It)

### ASTRA NEWS

- 60 ASTRA Membership: What's in It for Me?
- 60 Game Day NW Set
- 61 Master Class Reunites
- 61 WTHRA Award Winners

## 34 ASTRA'S MARKETPLACE & ACADEMY

- 36 Things to Do in Charlotte
- 38 Session Promises "Networking on Steroids" *An Interview with Sara Michel*
- 40 Keynote Points Way to High-Flying Success *An Interview with Bob Negeen*
- 42 Schedule-At-A-Glance
- 44 Track Programming
- 48 What's New
- 52 Show Sponsors
- 54 Meet the ASTRA Staff



## Departments

- 5 Message from the Chair
- 7 President's Report
- 8 Ready, Set, PLAY ... for Children with Disabilities
- 62 ASTRA Welcomes Its Newest Manufacturer Members
- 68 New Members
- 74 Index of Advertisers



### ASTRA Toy Times Magazine Mission Statement

Our mission is to act as a channel of communication for the general membership of ASTRA and to provide information about current happenings and future goals as decided upon by the board of directors, various committees, and ASTRA staff. We strive to provide useful and timely information and support for and about ASTRA members in accordance with the ASTRA mission statement.

We are always looking for good articles and input for the magazine. Letters to the editor are welcome. Please forward letters, comments, ideas, etc., to the ASTRA office – fax 312-222-0986, email [kmchugh@astratoy.org](mailto:kmchugh@astratoy.org).

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# Companies With a Conscience

by Mary Sisson, editor

**P**art of the charm of neighborhood toy stores is the stories they tell about the toys they sell. And sometimes those are stories of hope, caring, and making a difference in the world.

This issue of the ASTRA Toy Times Magazine features three such companies: Tegu, Kahiniwalla, and Bears for Humanity. Each one is founded on the principle of giving a hand up to people in need. By employing the underemployed, they offer hope and dignity. While creating quality toys, they place high value on fulfilling a mission that goes beyond the bottom line.

Two of these are brand new ASTRA members. Certainly they aren't the only companies practicing social responsibility at their core. We could easily have written about PlanToys, with sustainable play at its heart, or Green Toys, which recycles milk jugs into sturdy plastic toys, or many other toy makers that aim to make the world better.

But there's plenty of inspiration packed into these three. While people come to their neighborhood toy stores to find playthings that will rock their child's world, these companies want to bring children, families and communities into a better place. One simple toy can accomplish both.

## Changing the World One Bear at a Time

Give one bear for every bear sold. Make the bears out of organic cotton and hemp for maximum softness and minimal allergens. Employ the underemployed. And do it in the United States.

Sound like a dream? It is. It's the dream of Californians Vijay and Renju Prathap. And they're bringing it to reality through their company, Bears for Humanity.

You might say this story began a couple of years ago when the Prathaps had twins. They wanted to give them the healthiest foods and safest toys.

But really, the story starts two generations earlier, with Vijay's father.

"My father is my role model, a great humanitarian," he said. He'd grown up so poor he only ate once every two days, but put himself through college and became an international banker.

"He made his wealth and gave every penny of it to women and children," Vijay said. "I have that in me – the human legacy, to help people."



His master's thesis was on e-philanthropy, and he took a number of internships with nonprofits to write code that would let them integrate content onto their websites. He and a fellow DePaul University computer science graduate started their own company, where he developed his forte of leading, inspiring and coaching.

All this came together in his desire to build a company that is ethical, deeply American, and exceptional. Vijay subscribes to actor Kevin Spacey's elevator theory – if you are lucky enough to do well, it's your responsibility to send the elevator back down.

The 3 million children in America who live in poverty got his attention, and foster children in particular. "When I looked into the numbers it brought tears to my eyes," he said.

The Prathaps settled on making teddy bears, a global symbol of love. Unable to find organic faux fur, they hired an organic textiles expert to create one. She combined hemp, which is naturally hypoallergenic, and cotton to create the softest, safest fabric for the articulated teddy bears. The fibers are certified under Global Organic Textile Standards.

Already connected with Toys For Tots, hospitals and other leading children's charities, the couple heard a mattress store ad on the radio that said, "Not everyone can be a foster parent. But anyone can help a foster child." They decided they should give bears to foster children and visited the director of human services for San Mateo County to make connections. That contact led them to CalWORKS, California's welfare-to-work program.

So far they've hired and trained three women, with openings for four more. "Every one of them is just so passionate, just like us," Vijay said. One of the women, a former foster child, is training to be the Bears for Humanity spokesperson.

With one factory in Union City, California, right in Silicon Valley's backyard, he hopes to expand with factories in the Midwest and East.

When a customer buys a bear from the Bears for Humanity website, a second bear goes to one of the company's selected organizations.

But when a retailer buys them wholesale, that retailer can choose a local charity to receive an equal number of donated bears.

Attendees can find Bears for Humanity at booth 1457 at ASTRA's Marketplace.

"Changing lives one bear at a time – that is the elevator going back down," Vijay said.

## The Stories These Toys Could Tell

Kahiniwalla means "storyteller" in Bangla. And Austin Miller, co-owner with his wife, Marita, has stories to tell.

There's the story of Kulsuma, 42 and the mother of four. Her family lived in a tiny and precarious shared space with one toilet for eight families. Now they live in a home with their own toilet. Every time she saves a little money she buys a cow; she now has five. You can see the optimism in her eyes.

And the one about Akima, 24, whose husband is a day laborer, some days finding