

When Inventing is **Kid's Stuff**

MOM AND HER 8-YEAR-OLD GIRL BUILD A THRIVING
PRODUCT LINE FOR CHILDREN **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

THROUGH MY many years of interviews for *Inventors Digest*, readers know of my “Shark Tank” obsession. But I also watch the show to look for products for my almost-3-year-old grandson, Joshua.

Big Bee Little Bee, featured in October on “Shark Tank” Season 14, is a line of products for youngsters—including high-quality, creative, colorful arts and crafts, personal hygiene and household items. Great website, too!

We spoke with Amy Leinbach, who shares the biz with her young daughter and co-inventor, Marlo.

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): How did Big Bee Little Bee come about, and what was the first invention you developed? Please share all the various products you both invented.

Amy Leinbach (AL): When Marlo was an infant, she screamed, as many babies do, every time she was taken out of the bathtub. We always tried to dry her as quickly as possible, but of course we had to do it safely. We'd lay a couple of towels on the countertop for cushioning and use another to keep her covered and dry her off.

When we got tired of that constant towel pile, I searched for a towel with a cushioned back.

When I discovered one didn't exist, I made it. Along with the cushioned back, I also designed it to have little wings of the cloth to keep parts of her covered while we dried and diapered the rest of her.

It was a hit in our home, so I decided to make more. We called it the Snow Angel because that's what it looked like. Parents and grandparents loved it, but sadly we needed to discontinue it after a time. It was simply too expensive to manufacture, and we couldn't make it profitable as it had been engineered.

I learned a great lesson from that project: Always consider the cost to manufacture before completing the design.

The inventions we currently sell include the brand-new SoftShell Snap-Close Food Storage Container, ScrubBEE Easy-Grip Silicone Scrubber, Build-A-Straw Adjustable-Length Silicone Straw, and Marker Parker Grip-Tight Coloring Organizer (my personal favorite, as it was invented by the Little Bee!).

EGT: Have you had any snafus during product development?

AL: The word “snafu” pretty much defines the past two years for us! Throughout COVID, we experienced a massive supply chain breakdown and went without our best-selling product for almost an entire year. We'd finally remedied the situation in the summer of 2022 and were able to begin scaling again.

But, a plot twist: We got our supply chain cut off entirely recently—completely out of the blue—and for every one of our products. However, having experienced the grind for so long, building the strong network we now enjoy, we were

The Build-A-Straw Adjustable-Length Silicone Straw lets kids create the straw height they want. Each straw is contained in its own slim travel case.



“We have seven issued patents—both utility and design—and one pending. ... Although I believe in bootstrapping the early stages of product development and business, I don't feel that way about patents.”—AMY LEINBACH

able to rebuild it completely within weeks. We also brought down our cost of goods significantly, so a seemingly terrible situation on its surface was actually a blessing in disguise!

EGT: What were the various reactions from the “Sharks,” and did you make a deal?

AL: That was certainly a unique experience! Proud mom that I am, I knew the Sharks would be wowed by Marlo’s Marker Parker and adore her creativity, kindness, and confidence.

But me? I wasn’t so sure. Since we’d seen enough episodes, we knew going in that there would be a decent chance of the Sharks seeing me as a serial inventor—apparently not their favorite trait. And alas, that’s what they saw (“inventoritis,” to quote Mark Cuban).

Although we didn’t receive offers, Marlo and I still consider it a win because we worked as a team, gave it our all, and experienced something extremely cool together!

EGT: Are you manufacturing in the United States, or overseas?

AL: When we first made the Snow Angel, we manufactured it 15 minutes from our home. Unfortunately, the high cost to manufacture combined with a very high scrap rate made continuing in the U.S. untenable.

Although we moved the manufacturing overseas, we still couldn’t bring the cost down to a point that allowed for an acceptable margin. We now manufacture entirely overseas to keep our cost of goods low and our products accessible to as many people as possible.

EGT: What is your experience with third-party lab testing (for children’s products) to comply with the many government regulations?

AL: Fortunately, we’ve had no difficulty complying with government regulations. Our product quality is of such

great importance to us personally, and I think it’s for that reason that our products have always passed without question.

EGT: Tell us about your “giving back” policies.

AL: We’re proud members of One Percent for the Planet and partner with Well Aware, an organization that implements sustainable, clean water systems that drive development and empower communities in East Africa. Over the years, we’ve also gifted thousands of ScrubBEEs to children without permanent homes.

EGT: Are any of your products patented?

AL: We have seven issued patents—both utility and design—and one pending. Some took a couple of years to issue, and one issued in just a couple of months.

Although I believe in bootstrapping the early stages of product development and business, I don’t feel that way about patents. When it comes to nonprovisional patent applications, I always have a trusted attorney prepare it.

EGT: Have you had any knockoff issues?

AL: I once spotted a copycat ScrubBEE listing on Alibaba. They used our text, our images, everything. Fortunately, we never saw the physical knockoff hit the market.

Amy Leinbach and her co-inventor daughter, Marlo, appeared on “Shark Tank.”





The Marker Parker Grip-Tight Coloring Organizer, invented by Marlo, firmly grips marker caps to allow kids to remove a marker without removing its cap.

We've seen recognizable companies make products that seem to borrow essential elements of our innovations, but that's never bothered us too much.

EGT: What guidance do you have for novice inventors, particularly inventions for children?

AL: If you want to make a product for children, consider starting by observing the way they approach challenges.

If they run up against a particular challenge repeatedly, maybe they could benefit from a tool to help them. If that tool doesn't exist, you may be the perfect person to create it! Identifying a problem and creating something that solves it is what inventing is all about.

If you have a product idea, bootstrap the early stages as much as you can. You usually don't need fancy prototypes right off the bat. Marlo and I have made prototypes out of Play-Doh,

aluminum foil, Styrofoam, duct tape, cardboard, and more. Even something very rough can help others see what's in your imagination.

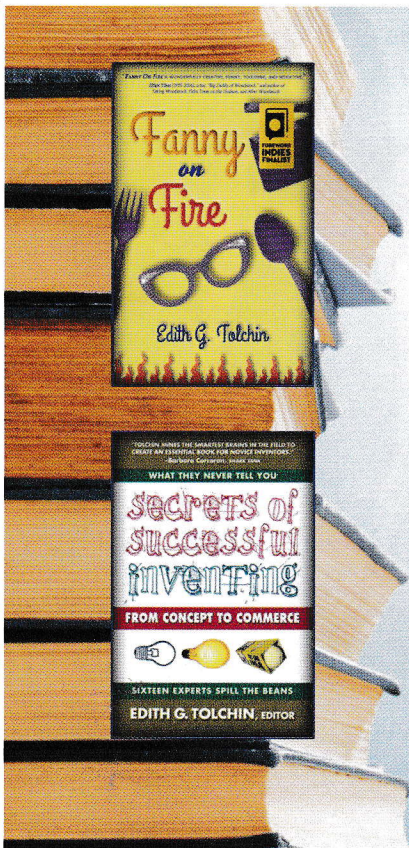
Also, look for a maker space in your area. One may even be at your library. We've 3D-printed prototypes for free at ours!

As long as you remain open to learning, you can do so much on your own. Talk to people, ask questions, join Facebook groups, watch a lot of YouTube.

Remember that you don't have to have everything mapped out ahead of you. Focus on going from Point A to Point B. It's tempting to try to tackle everything from A to Z off the bat, but in my experience, it isn't helpful. ☺

Details: bigbeelittlebee.com

Edith G Tolchin has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000. She is an editor (opinionatededitor.com/testimonials), writer (edietolchin.com), and has specialized in China manufacturing since 1990 (egtglobaltrading.com).



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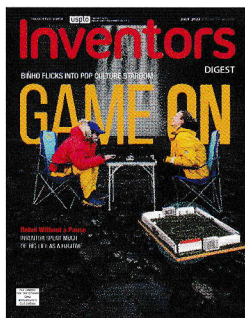
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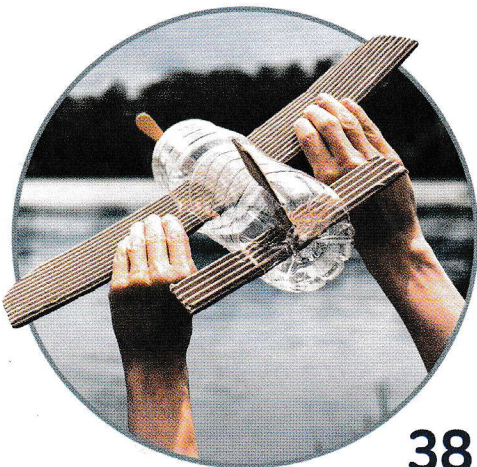
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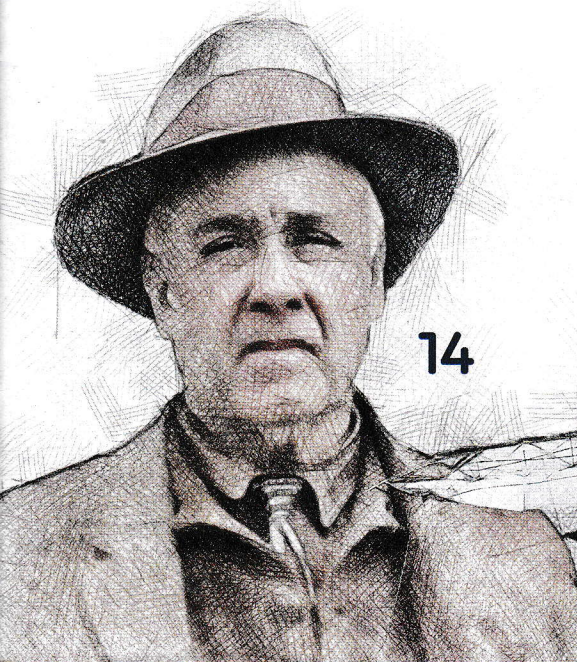
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Ryan Follesé and Josephine Skriver playing Biñho in Iceland; details on page 33. Photo by Alexander DeLeon (@Bohnes)



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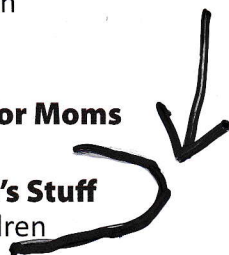
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