

Life/Entertainment

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Dad and lad succeed as toy biz partners

By DAVID SWICK

You know the kind: the little puzzles you hold in your hands, and twist and turn to try to figure out. They look so simple, but...

It's a mental, not a physical challenge, and you can just taste the euphoria that will come with the solution. But the answer doesn't come, and you cast the fool thing aside, wondering whoever invented such a dumb toy.

If you bought the puzzle in a toy store in Halifax, chances are the inventor was six-year-old Erik Demaine. For the past four months Erik and his dad Marty have been spending hours at their kitchen table, thinking up, designing and producing puzzles.

Erik took some of his new toys to school, providing hours of fun and challenge for his Grade 1 classmates and teachers. Woozles Children's Book Store in Halifax heard about them, and suggested they might be marketed. Today, six stores in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts carry products of the Erik and Dad Puzzle Co.

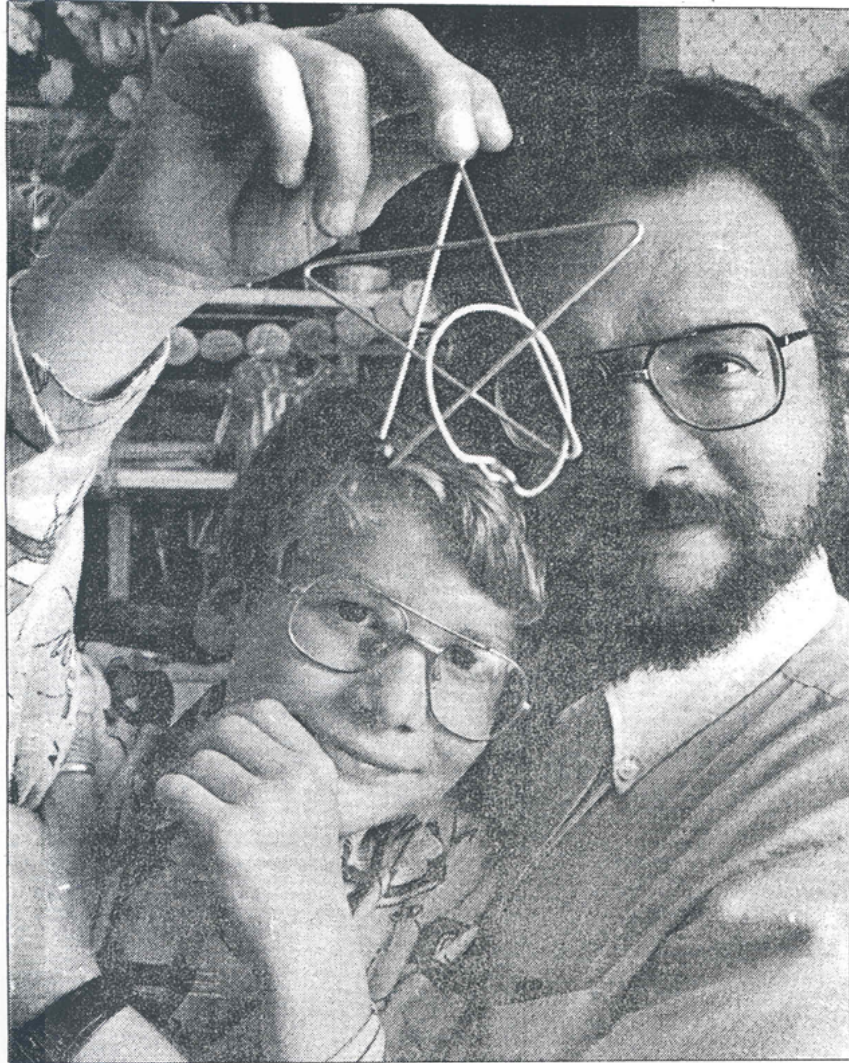
Most of the puzzles are Erik's ideas. Marty then uses wire and other materials to make it, and then Erik puts the new puzzle through a stringent quality control exercise: he shows it to his friends at school. Judging by their reactions, Erik decides if it meets company standards.

Trudy Carey of Woozle's enjoys dealing with the new kid on the block. "Erik and Dad always come in together, with their little briefcase. At first I thought, 'Oh God, here we go.' But the father really lets him make corporate decisions. It's a riot, but it's not pretentious.

"The puzzles are great for travelling in cars, so the kids won't get fidgety. Or for stocking stuffers. We decided to take a risk with them, and now they're a big seller."

Early problems

It hasn't been all smooth sailing for the Erik and Dad Puzzle Co., of course. They had difficulty getting a bank account (you are supposed to sign the form — Erik has only learned to print), a joint business licence (because Erik's a minor), and the tax licence people were not impress-



Erik Demaine and his dad, Marty, with one of their puzzling creations.

ed that a company rule allows both Erik and his Dad to give out puzzles as gifts whenever they like.

But the goodwill they've met has overcome any problems. A printer and typesetter have offered their services (for the

packaging) free or at a discount, and every store they have asked to carry their product has agreed.

But the biggest rewards can't be measured on a scale of business success.

Says Marty, "There's a problem with toys on TV, and watching other kids play with them, because kids will come up and say 'You're playing with it wrong: there's only one way.' The toys we're making involve your imagination and improve your thinking. It's the concept of improving kid's abilities. And we have a lot of fun doing it."

Split money

Any parent of a six-year-old might well wonder how a single project could hold Erik's interest for four months, let alone for another couple of years. The trick is that the project is always changing; new puzzles are created or worked on; there is the marketing to consider; a better package to design; books to juggle. And the money, split 50-50 helps too.

Erik says he hopes to be a scientist when he grows up. Then, with a couple of cookies and a glass of root beer, he leaves the boring adult conversation to go watch cartoons.

A single parent, Marty has been living alone with Erik for three years. Before that time, Marty says he was a "workaholic" and didn't spend much time with his son.

When suddenly faced with the role of single parent, "I got so concerned about being a good father, I went to his day care 20-30 hours a week, as a volunteer. I would play with the kids and had to think of things to do each day. I learned things to do with Erik, and became involved in kids' projects."

A self-employed craftsman, Marty says the Erik and Dad enterprise has been the best kind of business endeavor. "It's giving him a real good business experience. And we are making something we genuinely think is good for kids."

The company's future looks bright. Erik and Dad are playing with a number of games they might market and are close to releasing a new line of nine more puzzles, including some that are "nearly impossible" to solve. You've been warned.

STU DUNCAN