

# Rainbow babies tell Brooklyn toy story

Inspired by nabe's diversity, two moms hatch business plan — FAO Schwarz takes notice

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Sometimes starting a business really is child's play.

Inspiration came to Crystal Granderson-Reid and Janai Nelson four years ago during a playdate with their toddlers in the Prospect-Lefferts Gardens section of Brooklyn, where they both live.

"We were thinking about all the wonderful cultural exposure that our children get here, and the world we want to create for them," Nelson said. "We thought that there were just no products that reflect the diversity of our neighborhood — ethnically, socially, economically, everything — so it would be a fantastic idea to come up with a product that represents that."

Encouraged by a television show about mothers with great ideas, the friends decided to embark on a business venture together.

"We thought: 'This is something we can do. Why not us?'" Nelson said.

That optimism, along with a lot of hard work, has landed their first product — a line of soft dolls named Brownstone Buddies and aimed at the under-5 set — a spot on the shelves of the city's most iconic toy store, FAO Schwarz.

Nelson, a 35-year-old law school professor, and Granderson-Reid, a 34-year-old stay-at-home mom, held weekly meetings to brainstorm and shape their ideas into a cohesive plan. They came up with eight characters, each with distinct cultural identities and interests. Among them are an African-American girl who adores math, a Chinese-American sports buff and a book-loving girl of Hispanic heritage.

"We wanted something that would

excite, inspire and affirm children of all backgrounds. And, specifically, we wanted to target the earliest learners," Granderson-Reid said.

They were careful to trademark their ideas for characters and began working on prototypes of the dolls, picking out fabrics that would reflect various skin tones and working with a seamstress to make them. The duo plunged a few thousand dollars and hours of work into their new business.

"The best part of the process has been our creative meetings — from stuffing to skin, to see these prototypes come to life," Granderson-Reid said. "When we sat up these dolls and looked at them, it was just amazing."

Finding a way to get them to the

**'We wanted something that would excite, inspire and affirm children of all backgrounds.'**



FAO Schwarz liked doll diversity. Photo by Andrew Savulich/Daily News



Janai Nelson and Crystal Granderson-Reid launched line of multi-cultural dolls. Photo by John Tracy

marketplace was tougher — at least until the pair heard about FAO's toy auditions. The company began holding try-outs two years ago in an effort to find new talent.

"We thought this was a great way to discover toys, designers — companies with products outside of the mainstream toy businesses," said FAO chief exec Edward Schmults.

Thoroughly thought-out concepts that are ready to be manufactured often have the best shot, Schmults said. "It's best when someone's actually committed time and some money

to make a sample. We can grab it and play with it."

FAO will kick off its 2007 auditions this Thursday at the Fifth Avenue store and will hold subsequent sessions on May 10, July 12 and Sept. 20. Applicants need to register online at fao.com.

Brownstone Buddies were plucked out of obscurity at an FAO audition last May. Other winners last year included a \$6,000, 225-lb., life-sized aluminum piggy bank, a plastic 3D origami set, and a plush horse that straps onto a child's car seat.

Nelson and Granderson-Reid came to the audition well prepared, bringing their doll prototypes and a presentation on posterboards.

"We set out with a mission and a vision," Granderson-Reid said.

Two weeks later, they heard that they had been chosen as finalists out of some 200 hopefuls. "We jumped up and down and we screamed," Granderson-Reid said. "We have those moments where we turn into little girls."

FAO helped the pair find a manufacturer in China, and the dolls are slated to be ready for sale this holiday season.

Once the dolls are in place, they want to add related products and bring their Brownstone Buddies idea to publishing and television, Nelson said. "It's just so important to dream and to dream big."

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## ► Q&A

**What has been your biggest challenge?**

**Granderson-Reid:** "Our biggest challenge has been finding the right partner. Meeting up with FAO, we definitely got a great start in things."

**What would you do differently?**

**Nelson:** "We would have loved to have been on the market on the market sooner ... but we really just operate from a positive perspective. We learn from each experience."

**What was your biggest surprise?**

**Granderson-Reid:** "How creative two people together can be, and how creative we are as a team."

**Nelson:** "It's always a new and fresh feeling when people see the product and have such a positive reaction."

**Where do you want to be a year from now?**

**Nelson:** "We want to walk down the street and see kids of all different backgrounds holding a [Brownstone Buddies] doll of another background ... and having a full appreciation of themselves and every other kid around them."

**Granderson-Reid:** "We see us being a prominent brand in the marketplace."