

Toy creator is saddled up for success

By Harold Davis

Special Correspondent

Article Launched: 04/16/2008



(Paul Desmarais/Staff photo)

Amy Pennington of Greenwich has launched Paradise Horses, a line of poseable toy horses. She started the company in 2004, creating horses that feature 75 degrees of movement so they mimic realistic motions. Pennington's horses are sold through 46 independent retailers nationwide.

- Her toy horses may not whinny like the real ones, but Amy Pennington believes they move and look more lifelike than other toys on the market.

The Greenwich resident is the designer of Paradise Horses, a line of toy horses that can articulate poses of their real-life subjects.

"Horses can be very expensive. We hope children can get a very realistic experience with our toys. Parents say, 'I wish these were around when I was a kid,'" said Pennington, president and founder of Paradise Horses.

Pennington, whose family has horses and a barn in Bedford, N.Y., saw a void between My Little Pony and Breyers horse toys that are marketed to girls. She decided to create something that was more than a collectible.

Pennington, who started her company in 2004, began selling Paradise Horses about six months ago.

"It took two years to have a functional armature inside the horses. With our horses, there's 45 degrees to 75 degrees of movement. They're jointed in three places: The shoulder, knee and ankle. We wanted our products to be grounded in realism," said Pennington, who has a patent pending for the armature technology.

Paradise Horses are sold through 46 independent retailers around the country. Her horses and ponies sell for \$49.99 and \$39.99, respectively. They are available locally at Smart Kids in Greenwich, Beval Saddlery in New Canaan and Toy Chest in Wilton, Ridgefield and New Canaan.

She also sells them through her company's Web site, www.paradise-horses.com.

But Pennington is not trying to compete with her vendors. She has partnered with Shopatron, a company which "funnels out business to the stores."

Pennington said she caught the entrepreneur bug while working with entrepreneurs in the investment banking and private equity fields with Morgan Lewis Githens & Ahn Inc.

She also has worked as an analyst handling mergers and acquisitions with Merrill Lynch.

Pennington credited Gordon Segal of Crate and Barrel as an inspiration for pursuing her own business.

She plans to expand her business into an online game Web site in the next few months.

"You have to be online. Kids play with toys less as they get older, and they want to be online," she said.

Although the current Web site offers as online registration for new Paradise Horse owners, she said the games will further the experience.

"It's similar to Webkinz and Bella Sara (toys that also have online games), where there's a health and happiness barometer, and you can see the consequences of your actions. If you feed your horse, it's going to be happy," Pennington said.

Kathleen McHugh, president of American Specialty Toy Retailing Association in Chicago, sees a trend in toymakers expanding into interactive online play as an enhancement.

Breaking into the toy industry is difficult, she said, commenting that Pennington made the right decision to focus on independent retailers.

Small companies usually don't have a sufficient budget or wherewithall to fight for shelf space at a Wal-Mart or Target, McHugh said.

"She knows her market and it looks like that she's got something that's a high-quality product," McHugh said. "It's a niche market, and you have to go where your people are. The people that are interested in giving a toy of high quality are already shopping at neighborhood toy store.

"I think the specialty market is where the trends are created," she said. "It's a reverse pyramid. At the top is the hot new product, and eventually it works its way down to the masses."