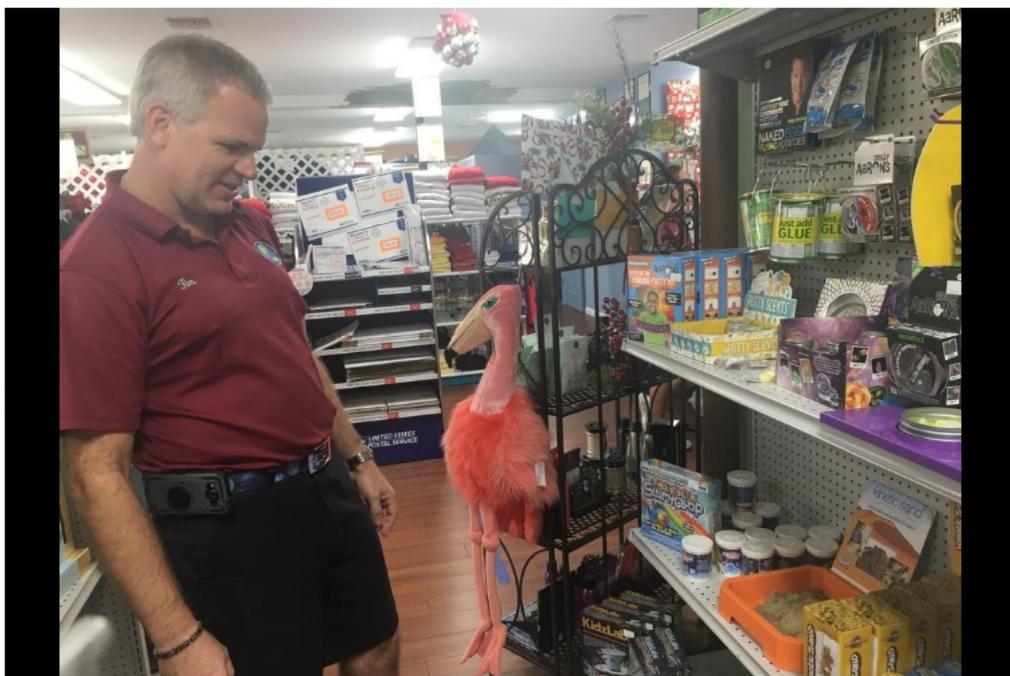


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LAURA FINALDI: Toys 'R' Us is gone, but spirit of play is alive and well



BUY PHOTO

HIDE CAPTION

Tim Holliday, who owns Children's World on Bee Ridge Road with his wife, Cynthia, shows off some of the toys at the store. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / LAURA FINALDI]

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A big question this holiday season is what sales will be like following the chain's demise

Last week, I was at a toy store waiting to interview the owners when someone asked me if I wanted to play a game.

It was a quiet Friday afternoon at **Children's World** on **Bee Ridge Road**. Toy buyer **Erin Hevern** asked me if I wanted to play **Slapzi** with her while I waited, so I did.

If you've never heard of Slapzi, it's sort of like a kid's version of **Egyptian Ratscrew**. You win by slapping your card on top of another card, but instead of regular playing cards, you get five double-sided picture cards with things like dice, four leaf clovers and hummingbirds on them, and you have to match them with clue cards. For example, if the clue is "often found in water," then rubber ducky, canoe and frog would all be acceptable answers. If the clue is "lighter than you are," then you could win by slapping your starfish, grass or ladybug card on top of the clue.

We stuck to the rules for the first few rounds, but it wasn't long before things started to get out of hand. At one point, grapes became an acceptable answer to "often found in a purse." It was a positively silly time.

Cynthia Holliday, who co-owns Children's World with her husband, **Tim**, remembers when **Toys 'R' Us** used to be like that. When she was young, it was the place to go. Kids would ride bikes and scooters through the aisles and play games with each other. She said it was like **Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium**, the magical, fanciful toy shop in the movie of the same name where ideas kids cooked up in their imaginations somehow came to life.

One of the big question marks this holiday season is what toy sales are going to be like following the demise of Toys 'R' Us. It's something I've wondered about recently as the holidays approached, but to be totally honest with you, I haven't given much thought to American toy stores in a long time. All I know is I have two young cousins, and one of them used to play with Doc McStuffins dolls. I've seen so many kids playing games on **iPads** in recent years that I've started to wonder if the word "play" means the same thing to them as it did to me when I was little.

After talking with Tim and Cynthia Holliday, I've realized that for the most part, my idea of "play" is alive and well. In their 12 years of selling toys at Children's World, demand for family-centered activities, like games and puzzles, has been consistent, they said. Kids are also really interested in science, arts and crafts and active games. The biggest change the Hollidays said they've noticed is a shift away from play that involves pretending, like dollhouses and **Fisher-Price** kitchens. But games are still really popular.

Apparently, that wasn't enough to keep Toys 'R' Us in business. The competition from other, more diversified retailers, such as **Walmart**, **Target** and **Amazon** was fierce, and the big-box chain, though beloved, didn't have the charm of small, locally owned toy stores. It also suffered from an unsustainable debt load from being taken private by **KKR**, **Bain Capital** and real estate firm **Vornado** in 2005.

The retailer accounted for about 12 percent of U.S. toy sales last year, according to global research firm **NPD Group**.

There has been some debate as to how Toys 'R' Us' massive liquidation sale will affect this year's holiday shopping. After all, wouldn't it make sense for parents to buy toys cheaply during the going-out-of-business sale, slap a "Do not open until **Christmas**" sticker on them and move on with their lives? You'd think, but that didn't really happen, according to NPD Group.

According to a study released Oct. 1, 83 percent of consumers who bought a toy during the liquidation said they already had or would give away the toy by the end of September. The remaining 17 percent said they'd be giving the toy away later.

Tim Holliday said he's heard talk of this among the **American Specialty Toy Retailing Association** members, but he doesn't think his Bee Ridge store will see as much impact. After all, the closest Toys 'R' Us was in **Bradenton**.

For a local store, it's primarily about giving shoppers a fun and interesting experience, Tim Holliday said. But it's also about encouraging people to shop local, and reminding them of how their shopping choices affect people's livelihoods, Cynthia Holliday said.

"You have to be more creative and you have to work harder now. It's not just, 'I'm the local guy, come shop with me,' because nobody cares about that. But if it's 'Hey I'm doing something really cool, I have this neat thing, you can come play,' then it starts to become a little different than buying online," Tim Holliday said. "You can only find so much unique stuff online. At some point, you have to venture out of your house."

Mike Ehik, owner of Celebration Corner in Venice, said he expects having Toys 'R' Us out of the picture will be good for his business.

"The bigger competition won't be there, so it gives us more of a chance to compete," he said.

Toys 'R' Us closed in June. That's like an eternity in retail years, said **James Miller**, senior director of external affairs for the **Florida Retail Federation**. It probably closed before the popular holiday toys for the season were announced.

"There's always those hot toys that come out in the end of summer or early fall. Parents are still going to want to get that hot toy," Miller said. "One new cartoon or television show can come along and really dominate the market."

On Saturday, Children's World participated in **Neighborhood Toy Store Day**, an event held through the American Specialty Toy Retailing Association that celebrates local toy stores. Kids who came to Children's World got to play and make things like their own goopy putty with Aaron's Thinking Putty. They even got to write letters to Santa and send them through a mailbox that brings them straight to the North Pole.

Celebration Corner participated in Neighborhood Toy Store Day for the first time this year. Ehik said kids enjoyed playing with toys like **Wikki Stix** and dough from an eco-friendly brand called **Green Toys**.

"It was beneficial. It brought a lot of children in, parents and grandparents. It was a good experience for the first try. We got a lot of good feedback," he said.

Toys 'R' Us mascot Geoffrey the giraffe may have packed his bags for now, but the spirit of play is more than alive and well.

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