playing around

Nontoxic, sustainably-built toys make for safe play and strong imaginations.

WORDS BY **REBECCA TREON** | PHOTO BY **JENNIFER JOHNSON**

WHEN JIM BARBER, A PHOTOGRAPHER BY TRADE, saw his professional assignments beginning to decline due to increasingly accessible technology, he decided to become a kid again. He identified a need in the market for a new type of toy: one that was innovative, nontoxic, and made from recycled materials. In 2012, when Luke's Toys launched, more than ninety percent of the toys played with in the U.S. were made in China out of cheap, flimsy materials, some of which had been subject to recalls over toxicity.

Barber and his son, Luke, a recent college graduate, began researching everything that would be involved in starting up a toy company, and started tinkering with toy-designing software. "Luke just has a natural instinct for designing things," beams his dad. "He had our first toy, the fire truck, designed within the week!" The truck proved to be as popular as they thought it would be, and a Kickstarter campaign quickly funded them toward production.

The material they opted to use wasn't on the market yet in the U.S.—a wood-plastic composite used widely in Europe. It's a blend of 30% sawdust and 70% polypropylene (one of the safest plastics) that makes the toys more durable than other plastic toys (the same material is used in decks). The result is a natural surface that's smooth and substantial. The sawdust comes from American furniture manufacturers, giving discards a new life. The colorants (which are safety tested and certified) are molded into the parts during production, meaning no chipping paint.

They duo initially had a tough time finding a manufacturer willing to try the new material in their machines. Vanguard Plastics in Connecticut finally became their go-to, and now produces the parts that make up Luke's Toys.

Safety-wise, Luke's are among the best on the market—they meet or exceed the Consumer Product Safety Commission's and the American Society for Testing and Materials' standards. The process, from design, 3-D printing, kid testing, mold-making, part manufacturing, assembly, and safety testing, is an involved one. In fact, Luke himself puts the finishing touches on the vehicles, drilling holes and permanently attaching the axles to the wheels so they never fall off. Luke and Jim even assemble the packaging in house.

Currently, Luke's sells four different wheeled toys, though they have designs for around thirty more, and all four of the toys can be taken apart and fitted to each other.

"As adults, we'll put something together and think, OK, that's done," says Jim. "But kids will mix and match the pieces from different trucks to create something new to play with." In his opinion, this open-minded approach kids have is fascinating—they are immersed in creative play and don't have the confines or ability yet of seeing how things "should" be, the way adults do.

"Kids love the whole process of making something. They need to manipulate things, put their own spin on things, to recreate the real world. They thrive on creativity, and need to have toys that engage them, not just a toy with a button you turn on that does the playing for them."

That's an idea we can play nice with.

lukestoyfactory.com.