

BRAVO, SIR!

BY ROBERT GRACE

Peers in two industries celebrate Tom Murdough, the undisputed king of rotomolded toys



Tom Murdough (Left) Tom Murdough and wife, Joy, at the ARM Hall of Fame induction ceremony in September 2021. (Above) Courtesy of Sarah Annay

also has been a socially active philanthropist in northeast Ohio, donating his time and millions of dollars to local causes.

Early in 2020, the Toy Association inducted Murdough into the Toy Industry Hall of Fame, an honor, it says, that “is reserved for those who have had an unimpeachable record of integrity and respect in the industry.” He joined an impressive roster of 79 toy industry luminaries, such as Milton Bradley, Walt Disney, Jim Henson and Stan Lee, who have been inducted into the Hall of Fame since it was established in 1984.

Then this year on Sept. 23 in Chicago, the Association of Rotational Molding (ARM) inducted Murdough into the Rotational Molding Hall of Fame. ARM stated: “Tom and his design team changed the face of the small household toy and the outdoor home playground markets and ultimately convinced many other molders that there was a business beyond tanks and simple moldings.”

The group added that Murdough’s companies have driven technical innovations in the global rotational molding industry, including pioneering Teflon PTFE (polytetrafluoroethylene) coating in molds and the design of products with few or no fasteners.

“Through smart design techniques,” the association said, “Murdough inspired complicated mold designs that previously had been thought to be impossible. Little Tikes’ needs drove innovations in UV

protection and color matrix developments for its outdoor products that all molders enjoy the benefits of today.”

Murdough reflected on his illustrious career in a mid-September telephone interview from the Simplay3 offices in Streetsboro, Ohio. Born in Oklahoma in 1939, Tom and his two older brothers moved the following year to Evanston, Ill., where he grew up and attended high school. He graduated from the University of Virginia and spent three years on the West Coast in the Marine Corps officer training program. His first job was as a salesman for Wilson Sporting

Goods, initially in North Carolina and then in Memphis, Tenn.

Building Success

Wilson Sporting Goods had purchased a business called Wonder Products Co. in Tennessee that operated one rotomolding machine and several injection molding presses. Wonder’s biggest product was a spring-mounted, rotomolded rocking horse, giving Murdough his first exposure to the toy industry. A fraternity brother from college who supplied medical products then asked Murdough if he did rotomolding, because his vendor had just gone bankrupt, and he needed someone who could mold 100,000 bed pans for him. Murdough said he could help.

Shortly thereafter, in 1968, Murdough was attending the Toy Fair in New York City when he met Jack Hill, who ran a small company called Rotadyne Inc., which had one rotomolding machine in a barn in Aurora, Ohio. The two had dinner and Hill asked Murdough to join Rotadyne, to help him build a line of children’s products. Murdough agreed and said he also could bring this major bed-pan molding job to the company, but that Hill would have to buy a bigger rotomolding machine—specifically, a McNeil Akron Model 1500-88.

Hill agreed, and the two embarked on the project. But after just a few months, Murdough said he and Hill were not seeing eye-to-eye on the company’s strategy. Rotadyne’s majority shareholder told Murdough he wanted him to run the company and bought out Hill for \$50,000. Murdough changed the firm’s name to Little Tikes, in part as a nod to the company’s lead designer, Charlie Tyke, and so, Little Tikes was born in 1969. The firm moved into a

leased plant in nearby Solon, Ohio, and set about creating a series of rotomolded products.

“We did pretty well,” Murdough recounts. In 1972, the fast-growing firm moved again, this time to a plant in neighboring Macedonia, Ohio, that had its own rail spur for delivery of railcars full of resin. “We had everything right there. We eliminated the middleman,” which made the company more cost competitive. The following year, it opened a factory in California.

Little Tikes continued to grow, and in 1979 launched its two most iconic products—Cozy Coupe and the Turtle Sandbox. These products helped to reshape the toy industry, which to that time had been primarily a seasonal business, focused on Christmas. These outdoor products—all of which were made of low-density polyethylene—were for spring and summer use and helped to level out some of the toy maker’s sales spikes.

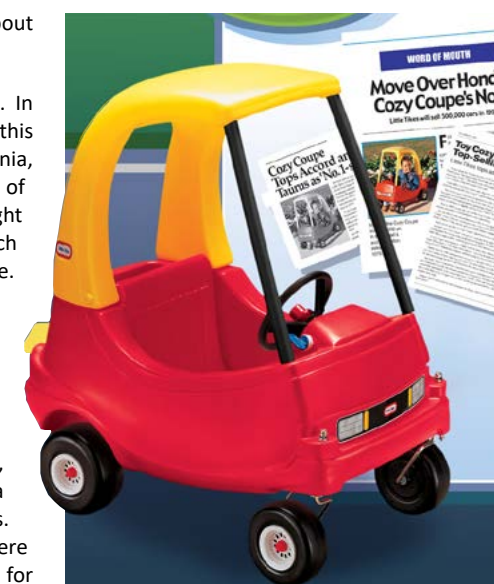
A Top-Selling Ride

Jim Mariol, a former Chrysler designer who headed Cincinnati-based industrial design firm Design Alliance Inc., was doing freelance work for Little Tikes and brought the idea of a toy ride-on car to Murdough, who loved it and decided to take it into production immediately. Three years later, in 1982, Mariol was granted a patent for his “Toy Automobile.”

The bubble-shaped, foot-powered Cozy Coupe had a roof, steering wheel and front wheels that swiveled. Some described it, tongue-in-cheek, as “a cross between a Volkswagen Beetle and Fred Flintstone’s vehicle.” It weighed just under 20 pounds and measured about 32 inches tall.

“We tried maybe 20 combinations of colors” for the product and tested it with employees, Murdough says, before settling on a distinctive red and yellow combination. “Our sales guys never thought it would sell,” he notes, given its retail price of \$50 to \$60 at the time.

By 1991, Wikipedia reports, the Cozy Coupe was selling 500,000 units per year, making it the top-selling “car” model in the U.S., outselling the 399,000 Honda Accords and 299,000 Ford Taurus vehicles sold that year. *The New York Times* in 1998 called it the “world’s best-selling car for much of this decade.” Little Tikes estimates it has now sold more than 10 million units worldwide.



The rotomolded Little Tikes Cozy Coupe. *The New York Times* dubbed the iconic toy one of the best-selling “cars” of the 1990s. Courtesy of Little Tikes

The green, covered Turtle Sandbox also proved to be a huge hit. Little Tikes went on to develop colorful plastics playground sets, picnic tables, basketball hoops, activity gyms, ride-on ponies, swing sets, party kitchens and more.

Murdough sold Little Tikes to Rubbermaid Inc. in 1984 for \$50 million. “I gave it away,” he laments now, and “today that really upsets me.” He stayed on and led the company for another five years. When he departed in 1989, Little Tikes had annual sales of \$300 million.

Once his noncompete agreement expired, he started Step2 Co. with five employees in Twinsburg, Ohio, in 1991, before later moving it to nearby Streetsboro, in the town next to Little Tikes. He reported that first-year sales at Step2 were \$540,000 but rocketed to \$17 million in year two. The company now employs more than 800 full-time employees and describes itself as “the largest American manufacturer of preschool and toddler toys and the world’s largest rotational molder of plastics.”

“I never tried to knock off a former employer,” Murdough stresses. “We came up with new products.” To that end, in addition to kids’ toys, Step2 focused on outdoor and garden products, such as garden carts and the now ubiquitous molded mailboxes. Murdough built Step2 into a hugely successful company and then, at age 68, sold it in 2007 to private equity firm Liberty Partners LP for \$180 million.

Three-Time Winner

He proceeded to “fail” at retirement, he quips. Unable to stop moving and eager to advance the cause of high-quality, American-made



The Rock & Roll Teeter keeps kids rocking. All other photos courtesy of Simplay3 Co.

products, Murdough launched Simplay3 Co. in 2016 in Streetsboro, the company name an amalgam of “simple” and “play.” The company, which employs about 100 people, operates a 60,000-square-foot factory, and earlier this year added a 65,000-square-foot warehouse. In September, it was awaiting a sixth rotational molding machine, whose delivery had been delayed for months.

Just as the startup Simplay3 was beginning to ship a large order to the mega-chain Toys R Us in 2017, the toy retailer declared bankruptcy and announced it was shutting its stores. That negatively impacted a number of smaller firms in the toy supply chain, Murdough says. He decided to diversify more aggressively into other markets, with the aim of selling to hardware chains and big-box stores. The company now offers a range of home and garden products, as well as mailboxes.

“I’ve become fascinated with this side of the business,” he says. Murdough is particularly proud of the Dig Free Easy Up mailbox the company developed that doesn’t require owners to dig a hole for installation. Rather, the hollow, rotomolded base and post is filled with 60 pounds of sand to keep it securely upright.

Murdough suffered a stroke in 2018 and has been working steadily since then to improve



The Young Explorers modular play system is highly customizable. Murdough pioneered rotomolded outdoor playsets, which created spring and summer demand for such toys.

his walking and speech capabilities. The physical therapy has made a big difference. The stroke “affected my memory, as well,” he says, but quickly adds, “It hasn’t affected my ability to assess our new products.”

While he still goes into the office regularly, he says he began reducing his level of involvement gradually about a year ago.

Now, the biggest challenges facing Simplay3, and many other manufacturers, are soaring resin prices and the difficulty in finding and hiring enough good employees. Still, he keeps Simplay3 focused on producing quality, American-made products.

Few individuals can lay claim to having founded a successful company, much less three. Two of the firms Murdough formed rank among the top five rotomolders in North America, based on product sales, according to the most recent Plastics News ranking: Step2, at No. 3, and Little Tikes, No. 5. Simplay3 does not reveal sales, but Murdough says the company is

Simplay3’s Dig-Free Easy Up mailbox uses sand as an anchor, eliminating the need to dig a hole to mount the post. Murdough broadened Simplay’s product lines to include home and garden products like the mailbox.



Tom Murdough meets with Simplay employees on the plant floor.

growing nicely and continues to expand.

His son, Marshall, in fact, is active in the firm, overseeing customer and media relations.

It’s a measure of the respect Murdough still commands that Isaac Larian, CEO of competitor Little Tikes, invited Tom and his extended family to celebrate the company’s 50th anniversary at the firm’s headquarters in June 2019. Larian, whose company MGA Entertainment now owns Little Tikes, nominated Murdough for the Toy Industry Hall of Fame.

“If anyone deserves to be in the Toy Industry Hall of Fame,” Larian told the celebration attendees, “it is Tom. I and my family and all the employees of MGA Entertainment are forever grateful to Tom for his creativity and boldness in creating Little Tikes.” ■

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