

*If you can't build castles in the air,  
How can you build castles anywhere?*

*~ Ancient Spanish proverb*

## *Dedication*

To Joy, Tom and Linda,  
For the inspiration and the growing up years...

## *Acknowledgements*



To my lovely wife, Joy, whose patience, love and support have made this book a reality.

To Tom, my son and Linda, my niece – the two shareholders and the main inspiration behind Beachworks. Like all children, they are filled with life, vivacity and boundless energy – playful and sometimes simply outright silly – but all in good taste and delightful fun.

To Howard Bobroff, CEO of Eagle Affiliates – for placing his complete trust in me when we first met in Chicago in 1995. And for being there to witness the birth of Beachworks, and its subsequent launch at the New York Toy Fair 1997.

This book is also dedicated to family, friends and complete strangers, adults and children alike, who provided tremendous encouragement and support throughout my Beachworks fascinating journey.

To list all who helped will be a happy privilege for me if not constrained by space in a volume like this. Instead, in place is the understanding and affirmation that I will return their favors whenever needed, and the promise to lend a helping hand to those who will take the road less travelled.



## *Introduction*

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*To see a world in a grain of sand  
and a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
and eternity in an hour.*

~ William Blake (1757-1827)

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

~ Robert Frost (1875-1963)

Are you sometimes nagged by the feeling that one day in your old age you might wonder what it might have been like to have gone all the way to make your dreams come true? To grasp the stars?

What would you do if you had an opportunity to make a universal toy, one that you feel will delight children and adults everywhere?

As one who has always encouraged the children to dream and reach for the stars, would you do so yourself? That when opportunities do land in one's lap, one should always be ready to grasp them.... Would you?



This book tells the simple tale of a simple man who grasped his one star.

This is the story of how one father's strong belief in a simple toy can make that critical difference in a kid's life.

I wish to share how I saw the world in a grain of sand and how my relentless pursuit to bring that 'world' to life set me on the path of the less travelled.

To managers of organizations, I want to share my view that it is possible for you and your staff to develop creative and innovative mindsets. It is not beyond any of us; everyone is capable of creativity and innovation.

Admittedly not many of us are going end up as innovators with great inventions to our names, but surely we each in our own ways can make small things great.

To parents of young children, I want to share my personal experience and my pleasures in a world filled with creative activities that I fashioned around, and shared with, my son, niece and nephews. And came away convinced that it is perfectly acceptable to be a child again when you are with your children.

Children are our source of life. Without them, we wouldn't be doing half the things we needed to do in the first place. Join me in a world where you can be your natural self, like the kids, and be enriched.



To all the children for whom Beachworks was created – you, too, can touch the stars someday. Remember you are that source of inspiration, innovation and creation - don't lose that fascination and curiosity when you grow up.

To aspiring innovators, I hope to share my thoughts, uncertainties and anxieties buffered only by moments of optimism throughout this journey of bringing an idea into the market.

It can be done.

Two moments stand out at the end of this great journey. One, the overwhelming elation at seeing my final product – Beachworks – on display for the first time in a toy store in Manhattan, New York. The other was upon winning the prestigious Oppenheim Gold Award 1997, a major recognition in the toy industry, and several other recognitions and awards thereafter.

For a few brief moments, the heavens opened, allowing me to experience the simple joy of accomplishment in a journey first thought impossible. It offered me a generous recognition in America – the 'land of possibilities' – from an industry that is alien in my homeland, and wonderful feedback from parents and children in a land faraway. How does one even begin to make sense of it?

And that was the marvel of 'holding infinity in the palm of my hand and eternity in an hour'.

It was in search of my star, that I started this journey...



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# *The Sandcastle Story*

| A Personal Journey







## *The Great Breakthrough*

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NEW YORK, NEW YORK  
MANHATTAN, DOWNTOWN NEW YORK  
SUMMER 1997

*Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today  
I want to be a part of it – New York, New York...*

*I want to wake up in a city, that doesn't sleep  
and find I'm king of the hill – top of the heap...*

*If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere  
it's up to you - New York, New York...*

This Liza Minelli song kept ringing in my head while Tom, Linda and I jumped with glee in our living room. We made it there, in the Big Apple!

“Yes! Yes!! Yes!!!” Tom clutched his right fist and pulled it down to imitate the American way of celebrating. Linda played along. I was just too ecstatic for words!

We were watching the video tape our New York partner, Eagle

Affiliates, sent us. It showed Beachworks being featured on MSNBC's Today Show, a major New York-based TV station.

Right there in downtown Manhattan, it showed beautiful, intricately-designed sandcastles for the forthcoming summer season. Susan Oppenheim of Oppenheim Toy Portfolio, the leading authority of original toys in America, announced the gold seal Oppenheim award for Beachworks. ABC Channel also featured Beachworks in its nightly news two evening prior to this.

“This is a great toy. It's good for co-operative play and ideal for both children and adults,” Susan reported.

Yes, we made it there – America, the land of possibilities...

That was the highlight of a journey that started as a simple family hobby of spending weekends on the beach in Singapore, building sandcastles and then designing tools to make this task more enjoyable.

“To hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour”

And this is how it began...





## *Dreamer*

IN SEARCH OF THE SANDCASTLE MAKER  
EAST COAST PARK BEACH, SINGAPORE  
SUNDAY AFTERNOON, LATE 1993

It was just another Sunday outing with my five-year-old son Tom, and Linda, my 11-year-old niece. As with every outing with Tom, I took Linda along to keep him company. Linda's father, my older brother, lives directly below our apartment, so it was convenient for his four children to be with Tom.

Until that particular Sunday, most of our activities were confined to either 'creative indoors' or 'active outdoors.' The former comprised mostly of craft-based activities, advance origami, 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles, acrylic painting on plastic figurines and drawing large cut-outs of Disney characters which inadvertently end up on the walls of Tom's room.

Once we built a long wooden table because I was not happy with the small plastic ones found in the store. The long table allowed Tom, Linda and the other nephews to play and work together. Among many successful weekend projects, we had some failures too, like the plan to build a kite large enough to lift Tom up in the air. Luckily, that experiment did not take off the ground, literally. Crazy, but true....

A typical ‘active outdoor’ would be an exciting 15-minute bumboat ride to Pulau Ubin, the tiny island northeast of Singapore, which still retains its rustic village charm reminiscent of my childhood. Or, we would go, discovering Singapore island, riding in the city’s clean and comfortable transport system, the MRT, tracing the rapidly changing skyline and new developments in the distant parts of the city. That was my favorite – a relaxed way to spend time for the less active adult like me.

In addition, we did the regular touristy things – visits to Sentosa, Night Safari, Mandai Zoo, Jurong Bird Park, Haw Par Villa, museums and every other place of interest I could think of. Window shopping on Orchard Road, lined from end to end with department stores and shopping malls; or riding the Singapore river on bumboats... – regardless of the number of repeated visits to any particular place, I always manage to make each trip come alive. I make it a point to draw their attention and fan their curiosity to small details around them so that every Sunday outing is a different experience. More parents should do that; it enriches the life of the children and draws the family together.

Then came the Sunday I call the Turning Point.

We were strolling along the East Coast Park Beach, just behind Macdonald’s. We saw a boy, about 10 years old, trying very hard to build a decent sandcastle. He had the standard beach tools – a bucket and spade. All he could do was position inverted bucket-shaped sand piles in a circle. He seemed bored with the repetitive task, the look on his face asking, “Why can’t I do more creative stuff?”

“What else can he do?” I thought, and started discussing with Linda and Tom. “Let’s try something different,” I suggested.



We noticed some wooden pieces washed ashore, perhaps debris from the ships anchored nearby. They were in handy sizes of between 10 and 15 centimetres long, and had nice square, sharp corners. Gathering about half a dozen of these we started shaping the sand with them. “Hey, looks cool, so simple!” exclaimed Linda.

In no time, we were building staircases, boundary walls and roof tops. Tom cheekily poked holes with the smaller sticks and, laughing heartily as usual, squealed, “Windows!”

We were, by then, having so much fun giving free rein to our individual and collective creativity that we didn’t realize how time had passed. By the time the skies darken, we had built a decent looking sandcastle. Okay, not quite there yet - more like a building with low walls around it. It also had long straight staircases on all four sides.

Jean Pek, a friend who happened to be strolling by, shouted “very nice”. Several other passers-by began gathering around and admiring our creative piece of sand sculpting. We were certainly proud! It was getting late, so like any responsible parent I took the reluctant kids home, leaving behind our kingdom-in-sand.

“So, why don’t we buy a sandcastle-making toy set and continue improving on this next week,” I suggested.

That night, I felt happy to have discovered the simple joy of creating with such simple, primitive tools.

So, we began our search for the sandcastle-building toy ...



The next Sunday, the adventurous trio, with a mission in mind, trooped down merrily to the largest toy store in the neighbourhood in search of a set that would allow for some creative sand play. We were in for a big disappointment. All we found were the single molds that looked too simple and childish. Some in the shape of single castle forms, some in that of animals.

I asked the store manager, who was busy with the rush of Sunday customers. She gave me a puzzled look. “What exactly is it you want?” she asked impatiently. After we described what we were looking for, she replied, “Look, if you can’t find it in my store, you probably won’t find it anywhere else in the world. This company has the widest range of every kind of toy right here.” Perhaps she was right. But they didn’t have what we are looking for. Tom and Linda shrugged it off as “okay” and moved on.

My reaction was different. I was amazed at the manager’s response. I thought: “How could she be so sure? And what if she was right... that we ‘won’t find it anywhere else in the world’?” That kept running through my mind after I left the store – and for the next few weeks. “How could this be possible?”

I continued my quest for the toy and it was the same story at every other toy store, big and small, in Singapore.

A phone call to my younger brother, Stephen, who lives in Australia’s Gold Coast, led to a search there. Result: no such sandcastle-building toys could be found in the city famed for its endless beautiful beaches. “What a strange request”, he must have thought.

Next, I called my Dutch friend Ernst Vogel sang from our days at the former Thomson Multimedia. I sent him a fax (remember, this



was a time before email became a household word). He may know something, I thought, as he is an expert in plastic molding. His reply from Holland – also famous for its beaches facing the cold Atlantic northerly winds – too was negative.

By then it had become a global search. My final attempt was through Debbie Chew, a lawyer friend in San Francisco. She couldn't find what we wanted – and half in earnest suggested: “Make it.”

What else could I do? I began to take Debbie's suggestion seriously.

One Saturday morning, many weeks later, I made my way down to the then SISIR (now renamed PSB Corporation), a government department for industrial standards and testing, which also has information on patents around the world. For a small fee of S\$20, I spent a wonderful day, rummaging through the archives for any patents filed for sandcastle tools or related items. It was at times hilarious, simply because most of the patents filed were ancient, weird and seemed impractical. Some were just downright funny.

At the end of the day, my search didn't yield anything remotely akin to the toy I had in mind.

Okay, so this was the proposition. The commercial market didn't have it. Nor the patent records. What could one conclude? Either it was too whimsical and frivolous a concept for anyone's attention; or it was not a commercially viable proposition

My next stop was the patent lawyer's office. He almost fell off his chair: “You can't file for a patent for something like a sandcastle.” I could well imagine his unspoken words: “Are you nuts?”

“Why not?” I persisted. In response I got a barrage of legal spiel which sounded like “Why are you asking this, you stupid man?”

He finally relented. If I insisted, he said, I could try and file under the Design Patent category. Simple enough. But then came the catch. It was going to cost a bomb! “Okay,” I replied. I was warned. The lawyer, I am sure, expected me never to return again.

I thought so too.

But we were both wrong...





## *Tinkerer*

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CREATING IDEAS, MAKING PROTOTYPES  
IN SINGAPORE AND JAKARTA, INDONESIA  
1993 TO 1995

For the next two years, I was made the General Manager of a TV factory in Jakarta. My free time was spent making prototypes of my sandcastle tools. I shuttled between work and home, taking the one-hour's flight to Singapore every Friday night after work and returning to Jakarta on Monday morning.

My idea was to design a series of molds for the different parts of the sandcastle, that can combine to form a complete intricately-designed castle.

The first shape I wanted was a brick-tiled wall with a door and windows. This translates into a simple, flat wooden plate with a series of neat rows of windows and door protrusions. Not the most creative piece, but it made its mark. Next were the walls. I glued a series of thick horizontal strings across them. When pressed into the sand, they made patterned walls imparting a castle-like impression. The roofs were easier to craft. I scoured the kitchenware section in stores for various cone-shaped funnels.

### *THE FIRST DISCOVERY*

*A triangular piece for making a staircase becomes the most important component in the kit because it never failed to carve out the perfect step. Till today I still think it is pretty neat. Every time I show it, people are amazed.*

That was the easy part. Now came the challenge, which was to devise a three-dimensional sand cast that would keep the surfaces intact. All the cupping systems in the market then were what I call the ‘vertical draw’ type. This meant that after cupping, the molds always had to be removed vertically, upwards. I visualized something that could ‘draw’ horizontally, like in a real plastic mold machine. That way, I could retain the intricate façade.

Another observation I made then was that the sand must be compacted in order that the structure does not crumble. Thus a two-section set similar to the formwork used in the construction industry was created to compact the sand.

### *THE SECOND TOOL*

*It was at this point that the sand mallet was born, which till this day, remains the most significant innovation of the whole sandcastle building set.*

During the compacting process, the formwork had to be locked to withstand the compaction. I experimented with several designs using metallic locks but none were ideal for sand conditions. The resulting sand structures looked great and definitely eye catching. However the lock mechanism, till this day, remains a challenge waiting to be solved.



By then, I realized that getting the carpenter to build more prototypes was not going to work. The visuals and concepts I had in mind could not be translated by someone else. So I set up my own workshop at home. Getting the basic tools and the wood was the easy part. To give form to the concept in my head drew a total blank.

I spent the next few weeks after office hours, in my workshop. Every weekend, back in Singapore, with Tom and Linda in tow I headed for the beach to test the prototypes I had created, to gauge their usefulness.

### *From Wood Age to Plastic*

Tom and Linda, by now, were thrilled with the prototypes that I hand-built and tried out in the sand. We had lots of novel ideas, but what we needed was a clear picture of what castles-in-the-sand looked like.

We started with The National Library in Singapore, Stamford branch (another personal favorite haunt since the authorities decided to raze it to the ground in the name of modern development). Anyway our mission was to seek out a range of architectural designs in order to build more tools. It was a fascinating re-search for us giving the term a new meaning! We unearthed a beautiful and exotic assortment of castles and fortresses around the world. We made a study of the subject and delved deep, learning the names of the various parts of the castles – and their functions.

We transferred this research to the design process - making simple sketches of what the tools would look like to build any particular part of the castle. We brought home photocopies of the pictures to study them closely but what we wanted were colored ones as we were convinced the black-and-white photocopies did not do justice to 'our' castles.



But how could we lay our hands on beautiful images of castles without spending a fortune on big picture books?

Sitting on the steps of the Library, we tossed up numerous ideas while licking our ice-creams. Then we got it! Travel agents freely display loads of colorful brochures; castles feature prominently in the ones on Europe. That was it!

Back in the workshop, I had so many wooden prototypes by then that I felt I had exhausted every conceivable use of wood. So excited about my new hobby was I that I took every opportunity to talk about it... to my Jakarta tennis group and just about everybody else I ran into.... Frankie, a new friend, was particularly interested and came to my workshop. Frankie is a man of few words. “Come to my store when you have time”, was all he said, handing me his business card - and left without giving me a clue of what he did for a living.

I found out later Frankie owns a hardware store in Jakarta; through him, I was introduced to plastic welding. Plastic welding is the process of using an industrial hot air gun to create a temperature high enough to melt plastic, yet not burn it. As with traditional welding, a filler rod of the same plastic material would be used. By melting and fusing the two parts together, a new shape is formed. Frankie also showed me how plumbers change the shape of pipes with this method. Hey, I went from wood age to plastic age. I can't thank Frankie enough.

This was Turning Point Two.

I graduated to new tools. With a hot air gun and many plastic pipes bought from Frankie's shop, I rushed home to my workshop. I learnt



to make use of the larger PVC plastic pipes. Slicing them into two, lengthwise and by submerging the U-shaped half into boiling water the plastic softened and flattened. For this work, one bathroom became an extension of the workshop (Luckily, I live alone, and can do whatever I want!).

Soon I was devising round towers and turrets, square corners lined with bricks.... a big wide world of construction molds opened up before me.

And a mega search for plastic began...

Back in Singapore, I raided my mother's kitchen for everything plastic. Tom and Linda followed me to practically every kitchenware shop across Singapore. Our aim was to find different shapes of plastic items. The more intricate, the better...

Then I decided it was time to store my designs electronically. For an industrial engineer, it's second nature to keep a record of his works. My training in AutoCAD, a software for industrial design, also came in useful. However, something critical was missing; I didn't have a sophisticated software nor enough storage space in my computer. No dynamic structural multi-dimensional work was possible on my system then. How do I do this without having to invest heavily on equipment? I stared intently at the PC for what seemed like extended eternity before a solution dawned... Microsoft Word! Yes, that humble word processing software was the answer.

From initial basic drawings of lines and shapes, I moved on to creating detailed technical drawings for each tool. Even at that point I did not think of any other use for this exercise other than as a means of documentation.

The weeks go by, then the months. I have, by now, made at least some 150 different parts of the sandcastle builder.

### *Heading for the Beach*

Although we had a great time experimenting with my prototypes, I always wondered if the others would feel the same passion for them. I was also keen to find out how the tools might react to the different types of sand on the beaches around the world.

Each opportunity to test out my prototypes resulted in a holiday beyond the beaches of Singapore's East Coast. And everywhere, the aim was to showcase my sandcastle creation and to obtain a market survey of sorts whether the product would be fun, desired or saleable.

At every different beach, I took care to test the tools on each different sand condition, ranging from the fine and powdery, found in Australia's Gold Coast, to the very coarse, common along certain parts of Singapore's East Coast. I found to my delight that the tools were equally effective despite the different sand conditions.

Feedback from the beachgoers was also encouraging. In fact it was always positive, perhaps because sandcastle building itself is a natural beach activity. Both children and adults alike are also open to trying new different tools.

### *Koh Samui, Thailand*

This beautiful island is especially popular with European tourists. An elderly Austrian couple chatted with me while I built a sandcastle near our resort. Back home, the lady works in the tourism department of Austria's famed fairytale Neuschwanstein Castle which is the inspiration of the fabled Disney castle. She was most impressed



with what I could do with my tools, and upon her return to Austria she mailed me a giant poster and several postcards of the castle. Till today, that poster remains the centrepiece of my house. I am thankful to the many like her who had reached out to help me in their own ways despite our being total strangers.

*Gold Coast, Australia*

Once during the school holidays I took Tom and Linda to visit their uncle (my brother) in Australia. We took a long drive to the tiny sea coast town of Byron Bay where we witnessed a Garden of Eden by the seaside – here the sand is the softest and whitest I had ever seen. The three sandcastles we built stood tall like fortresses. Again, many admirers.

*Club Med Bali, Indonesia*

Here we ended up on a quiet beach with a bunch of energetic and mischievous European kids who gleefully ravaged my big tool bag and began creating their own designs. I gave up trying to show them the right way to use the tools!

I quickly discovered the power that can be unleashed when tools are put into the hands of children and adults – and all the difference this made.

The simple shaping tools opened up a whole new world of possibilities.

*Langkawi, Cherating and Tioman Islands, Malaysia*

Since my new-found hobby, I took every opportunity to tag along Fey, my good friend and an avid diver who organizes diving trips. While the others went diving, I would stay on the beach to build



sandcastles. Both at Cherating and Langkawi, my nephews and I won top prizes in the local sandcastle competitions.

We also experimented with candles and sparklers on the sandcastles at night. Yes, a very pretty sight. One time a grotesque Halloween mask was used for a photo shoot and added to the fun.

And the experiments continued as did the novelty with each sandcastle...





## *Pathfinder*

TO MARKET, TO MARKET...  
SINGAPORE  
1994

While the time spent with the children was reward enough and we were proud owners of a homemade building sandcastle building set, something was still missing. My good friend Tan Wing Ming, a senior banker with a European bank then, was the first person to point me towards converting my toy into a business venture. “Go to America”, he advised after seeing our demonstration one Sunday morning at the East Coast beach.

That night, I had an incredible dream (probably the effect of too many long hours in the sun):

I dreamt I was on the beach with an endless stretch of sand before me. Then I began to wonder, what if ...

Number of people on the beach X  
Kilometres of beaches in the world X  
Days spent on the beaches X  
Summer, sunny days in a year X  
Years into the future...

My mind simply could not take in such an enormous number. God, it must be a very big number. What could I do with such a big number? How could I turn this figure into a commercial proposition?

By then, I had confirmed that my design could be patented. I had enough of an understanding of plastic moldings to know that the sandcastle building set could be made. At the same time, I was aware there was no market survey statistics to show that such a beach toy could sell. What did I need to do to get the project off the ground? Funds.

The next stop was a local government department that helps business start-ups. Before I could sit down, the lady officer appeared annoyed and reacted: “We have no money, we have no money.” Okay, yes I would probably need funds to start a business later on, but I thought her outburst a bit too premature. Still, I wasn’t angry with her, I just thought of the number of ‘crazy’ guys walking daily into her office proclaiming that they needed funding. It was a funny thought but she was not amused.

“So, you got a plastic toy....” She flipped her department directory for grants and funds, and continued, “plastic is not a sunrise industry here. We don’t have a toy industry in Singapore, and neither are we going to promote it.” Snapping the directory shut she said, “Sorry, can’t help you.” Thus ended our meeting. Just like that. It is an efficient department, I was told.

Never mind, I said to myself and went on to another smaller government agency that helps small and medium enterprises. Perhaps this would be more sympathetic to amateur innovators. This time I was luckier as the lady officer on duty could relate to my perseverance.



She said: “Okay, here’s the deal. Since I cannot persuade you to give up the idea, let’s do an armchair global market survey on the commercial demand for such a product. Only then can we determine whether it is viable to start such a business.”

I was told such a survey would cost about S\$10,000 (US\$5,700) and the government could subsidise up to 40%. This meant I still needed to pay about S\$4,000.

Sensing my hesitation, she persisted in a slightly awkward manner: “Mr. Lee, in the first place, if you think such a sum is too much I don’t think you should start a business.”

This time I was really angry. Yes, I knew it was a comparatively small sum for a big corporation with a big budget. But now I was all on my own. Everything is relative, right?

My gut feeling then was that nothing meaningful would come out of the numbers obtained through such a survey. Secondly, if I were to fork out that amount, I might as well take a trip to the market I believe in – US of A!

Besides, what did government officials know about innovations by nobodys like myself, I thought to myself. Perhaps I could get a better response from the toy retailers themselves. The general manager of the largest toy store in Singapore agreed to meet me through a friend’s recommendation. After a 15-minute presentation of my better-looking prototypes, he said in all sincerity, “Alvin, the toy business is a cutthroat business. The margins are very tiny and the game can only be played by the big boys. Every season I sell a lot of toys, but only when the cinema is playing the latest movie related to the products in the stores. The only way you can sell your toys is to get a movie based on them.”

It was pouring as I left his office. I was very tempted to throw the prototypes into the drain. How could I get someone to make a movie out of beach toys? It was absurd! Until that moment, I had never felt so demoralized about my product. I simply could not think of anyone who could put toys into movies. Perhaps Steven Spielberg or George Lucas could ... But Alvin Lee?

I could sense that he said it with care and honesty, not deliberately to pour cold water on me or my idea. Being able to make that fine distinction was important to keep me going.

The following week, TJ, my designer friend from Thomson Multimedia, introduced me to Mah, owner of a plastic injection plant in Singapore. An immigrant from Hong Kong, Mah knows the plastic and toy business there well. He, too, wasn't optimistic about the potential of my product. However, my determination must have struck him. To give me an idea of the cost of the whole set, he helped me work out the initial costing of each mold based on production in Hong Kong factoring in components such as a minimum run, packaging, different types of plastics, etc. My confidence was restored!

I then wondered how Asian businessmen could make a success in America.

Sim Wong Hoo comes to mind immediately. Owner of NASDAQ listed Creative Technology Ltd., global leader in PC entertainment products. An inspiring story of an Asian (first true-blue Singaporean at that) who made it good in America. From all that was written on Sim, I gathered the following:

Three men X four failures X 12 years =  
Success (that was not guaranteed)



That daunting formula kept ringing in my mind, and does so even till this day.

Much as I admired their success, I did not see myself emulating their feat. I was all alone. Tom and Linda were in primary school, so did not count. I was sure I could not afford even one failure, let alone four. Neither did I have 12 years. I was already 37 years old.

After much deliberation, I know I should not start on my own, even if I could raise adequate funds. My product should be launched in America first. Not Singapore, or Asia or even Europe. It had to be America, where even pet rocks sell. It could be manufactured anywhere in the world, but it had to be marketed to the Americans.

### *The American Dream*

I searched the trade directories in the US Trade Consul for information on the plastic and toy industry in America. I laboriously took down details of a long list of companies with the intention of writing to interest them on a partnership with me! During my research, something struck me: If the toy market was such a cutthroat business, why don't I find a plastic manufacturer instead?

Flipping through some American business magazines, I came across the Fortune 500 magazine which featured Rubbermaid. I discovered the company also owns Little Tikes known for its range of beautiful children playground equipment. What If I could get them interested in my concept?

I sent a fax to Rubbermaid's CEO Wolfgang Schmitt, telling him about my product. A few days later I received a reply from the VP of Business Development telling me about the Toy and Craft Fair '95 in August in Chicago. Would I be able to go there?

“Yes, yes, yes!” I faxed back immediately. And I suddenly had plenty to do before I went to meet them.

About this time, a lady lawyer with a sweet name, Honey, called. She had reviewed my case and persuaded me to continue with the application. I sensed that she was new and probably didn’t mind taking on something as ridiculous as my sandcastle patent. With her new confidence in me, I decided to give it a try and submitted my design patent application. She said they would issue me a patent pending number a few months later, which was fine by me.

Next task. I need to put together a business plan with some indicative costings. This was where my MBA education came in handy.

I shared my new business project with an old friend, Thomas Tham, who was planning a buying trip to America at the same time that I was supposed to be there. Tham was very supportive, and himself being a successful businessman, I was greatly encouraged.

The week before my departure, I threw a party in an Emerald Hill pub for a small group of friends, to get their well wishes. During the evening, I tried to get feedback on the presentation that I would be doing in America. Everyone was most encouraging.

I cheerfully announced, “\$5,000 and three months, that’s all I’m going to spend. If nothing happens, it’s going to be one very expensive holiday.”

A sabbatical of three months was an innocent notion, I thought then.





## *Selling the Dream*

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CHICAGO AND NEW YORK  
1995

Pouring rain and dark skies greeted me at Chicago's O'Hare Airport on my first visit to America. It was 8 am local time. From the plane's window seat I could feel the windy, chilly autumnal air by just looking at the airport workers down below. I felt intense excitement and exhaustion. Excited, because I was going to present my creation to the world-famous Rubbermaid the next day. And exhausted from a 14-hour United Airways' economy class flight.

From their fax, Rubbermaid was to have booked three lots at the Toy and Craft Fair. So, all I had to do was turn up there and sell my toy like hell to them. Or so I thought!

Next morning, decked in my brand new three-piece suit and armed with my large portfolio, business plans and prototypes, I marched down to the Fair. I decided to leave behind the heavy slide projector I hand-carried all the way from Singapore.

***SHOCK #1:*** A quick survey revealed that the Fair comprised 99.99% craft-manufacturers. No toys manufacturers could be sighted. Craft, more craft and yet more craft. From sewing kits to quilt making, to

painting and embroidery sets. Everything except the traditional toys I was hoping to see.

***SHOCK #2:*** Rubbermaid's three booths were empty! A last-minute cancellation, I was told.

I was demoralized but determined, now that I was there. So I trudged along the aisle and came to this booth, which looked like it had some Rubbermaid products. I introduced myself to an important-looking man. "Hi, my name is Alvin Lee and I am from Singapore. I would like to interest your company in a new business venture. Would you have some time?" I asked.

John Lowenthal, VP Marketing, Eagle Affiliates, introduced himself, smiled cautiously and queried: "Okay, what have you got?" We sat at a small table, and I opened my large portfolio. I could see that my pictures, those sci-fi pictures, held his interest. Some half an hour later, John made some phone calls and came back to me. "Can you come back tomorrow morning at 10 am and do a full presentation, as we are quite busy today," he said.

The meeting held on the following day was attended by Howard Bobroff, CEO of Eagle Affiliates; Russ Gropman, Marketing Director and Colleen Brogan, Marketing Manager and John himself. All of them took the trouble to make me feel at ease.

The next hour was to be my defining moment.

I took them through my new concept of building sandcastles and my complete business plan. Through a series of colorful slides, sci-fi style, I focused on the possibility of exciting futuristic sandcastles, nothing close to my prototypes. I wanted to inspire them with the



possibilities. Not with the plain looking plastics or the whole bunch of projected numbers I created.

They saw my vision straight away!

After my presentation, several questions followed, such as the amount of research I had done on the industry and the competition. They appeared quite satisfied with my answers and took time off to discuss, among themselves, while I nervously sipped coffee outside, in the corridor.

The jury had reached its verdict!

“Alvin, I would like to invite you to come to my factory in New York next week, would you have some time?” Howard asked, in his soft-spoken gentlemanly tone.

### *Touching First Base*

After cold windy Chicago, New York was bright and cheery. At Eagle’s facilities, I learnt a lot about their plastic kitchenware. After the customary first-right-of-refusal and a tentative contract, we agreed on a six-week period for Eagle to study the whole feasibility plan. Taking advantage of the free time, I toured north-eastern America. A beautiful New England was what I remembered.

Meantime, Howard had raised over US\$1 million for the project. This was to cover the cost of the new molds, marketing and a newly-created business unit for plastic toy products.

Over the next few weeks, we had lengthy negotiations, poring over the tiniest of legal details. Finally, Howard and I decided to take a leap of faith and inked the business licensing agreement. With an



energetic team behind Howard, I was confident the product would be launched successfully, and in time.

From then on, it took another year for product development, mold production and sales penetration to launch Beachworks in time for summer of 1997. Given the constraints, it was a remarkably short time to reach the market, compared to many other products in the same trade.

At the New York Toy Fair that year, we received tremendous media publicity, including in the Chinese equivalent of New York Times. It drew many curious competitors from Hong Kong and Taiwan to our booth.

The best compliment I overheard from their whisperings was: “I didn’t know they had a toy industry in Singapore ....” The fact is we don’t. We just have an eager father who followed his simple dream.

