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Shop Pittsboro: The Magic of Pittsboro Toys

by Francis DiNardo

Most people don't know this but I was once a kid. It's true! Although I'm now a man, that kid still lives in my head and he peeks out each time I enter the magical world of Pittsboro Toys in downtown Pittsboro. I recently met with the shop owner, and my friend Samantha Birchard, to discuss how she manages this wondrous place.



Thistle and Samantha welcome you to Pittsboro Toys.

Samantha is more than just a toy store owner, she believes in creating an environment of growth and opportunity for children. "I was always fascinated by child development. Even when I was an older kid, I was a tutor," she told me.

Samantha spends a good deal of time reading about child development. She uses that knowledge in service to her customers.

She pointed out to me that a toy should be fun and should leave open creative gaps which allow children to make cognitive leaps — like toys that ask questions rather than providing answers. "I think play is a very serious thing. Albert Einstein is often quoted as saying that play is the highest form of research." She thinks there's much wisdom to that. "I always try to pick toys for my shop that have developmental value."

Samantha keeps a selection of toys that appeal to the wide variety of customers who walk into Pittsboro Toys. It's important for her to have an inventory that includes a range of prices and reflects different interests because her clientele is very diverse. Her careful selection of quality toys is one thing that separates Pittsboro Toys from big box toy retailers. She believes that her customers respect that she doesn't overwhelm them with advertising or hype, that she's simply offering good quality products from which children can learn and have fun.

Samantha uses her knowledge and intuition to help adults — often grandparents — find the ‘right gift’ for the children they love. She often asks questions about the child or encourages a customer to talk about the child. She listens for things like, “...little Billy like robots, or dinosaurs or they might simply provide an age group.” These cues help her make recommendations to customers. She sometimes gets feedback from buyers who return to the store and tell her how much a child enjoys the toy she recommended. “But there’s always a little luck involved. You can know a particular toy is really good, but what will click with an individual kid is unpredictable,” she aptly points out.



Pittsboro Toys first opened in Pittsboro eight years ago. The store has zigged and zagged down Hillsboro Street from its start in a space above Roy Underhill’s [The Woodwright’s Shop](#). Then it was next door to the [Joyful Jewel](#) before moving to the current location in the historic Blair Hotel building on the northwest corner of the traffic circle. Samantha moved Pittsboro Toys to the current location four years

ago when she fell in love with the character of the space.

The hardwood floors have a classic look and the wide wall shelves lend themselves nicely to the display of toys. The decorative tin ceiling is another distinctive feature of the space. According to Samantha, “This ceiling was put in because of the bathtubs upstairs, it was a hotel and sometimes the bathrooms would leak.”

She also pointed out to me something that I had not noticed before in all my visits to the store — gutters run along the top of both walls from the back to the front of the store! The decorative indoor gutters look more like fancy crown moldings and I would never have guessed that they were put there to channel away water that might leak from the second-floor rooms.

The space itself has more interesting history. Samantha once spoke with a woman who worked in a general store that occupied that space many years ago. It then became a food cooperative before hosting the [Carolina Farm Stewardship](#) which relocated to a more suitable office space just before Pittsboro Toys moved in.

You only have to talk to Samantha for a few minutes before her love for Pittsboro and the people who live and visit here



become apparent. “The community here is so supportive! All the business owners look out for each other. They’re all in it because they value community.”

Samantha’s contribution to the community she loves extends beyond Pittsboro Toys. As a member and a past president of the [Pittsboro Business Association](#),

she stays in touch with other business owners. Although she’s not as active in the PBA as she used to be, she feels a bond with the organization.



Samantha also exercises her commitment to the Pittsboro community with her involvement in our Main Street Pittsboro program where she participated in the launch of the group and is now an active and valuable member of the Main Street Pittsboro Promotions Committee — you may have read her blog posts on this site recently.

I can’t end this piece without mentioning Pittsboro’s Toys’ beloved sales associate — Thistle (she doesn’t have a last name because she’s a dog). Thistle loves children and she would very much welcome you to bring your child in for a visit.

Stop by soon!

Pittsboro Toys

15 Hillsboro St.

Pittsboro, NC. 27312

919-545-1546

Call before you visit, as hours may vary

Tuesday to Friday: 10am – 5pm

Saturday: 9:30am – 5pm

Sunday: Hours vary

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