

Michael Barnett '89 And Family Find Success In A Children's World  
*By Grace McCluskey '05*

When Mike Barnett's clientele walk into the lobby they go wild for the vibrant blue, green, and purple walls falling in at odd angles. He welcomes his young go-getter customers with a rush of creativity straight out of a Dr. Seuss or Blues Clues.

Walk a little further into the main gym and you find yourself surrounded by more strangely angled rooms complete with disco balls and bubble machines. As you consider your surroundings on this particular week, you might find yourself in outer space or perhaps transported millions of years into the past and surrounded by dinosaurs. Customers never know what they will be walking in on from week to week and they are wild for it.

Mike, Juniata Class of 1989, is a busy man these days. His business is booming though an evening phone call to his home shows where his priorities still lay - his wife takes a message to call back after he is through putting the kids to bed.

Family is not only a priority to the Barnetts, it is their livelihood. It was nearly two years ago that he and his wife, Babz, decided to move the family from their home in New York to Richmond, Virginia. After the move, they opted for a career change of pace as well.

Shortly after arriving in Richmond with their two small children, they recognized a need for better quality art, music, and gym programs for children and their parents. The Barnetts hit the drawing table with ideas for a gym that engages and challenges children in the arts and education, providing and stimulating and interactive environment for creativity and imagination.

After months of tossing around ideas, Babz' creativity and marketing experience fused with Mike's operation and financing background and Richmond's premiere gym, art, and music center exploded onto the scene - the couple named their new venture - Romp n' Roll, a befitting name to convey the enthusiasm poured into this interactive and high energy learning center.

As an early childhood development center, Romp n' Roll offers classes to children from newborn to third grade. Once the children reach the age of three, parents have the choice of leaving them for the 30-60 minutes class.

Conveniently located in a shopping plaza parents have no trouble filling up that time apart from their children, and some even come back for Romp n' Roll's famous dance parties that conclude every class period.

According to the clientele, the coolest part of the center is that a new theme is chosen at the beginning of each new week and every class begins with a short story or poem to introduce that theme.

The Romp n' Roll website boasts "We re-invent the gym every week to match the theme so it's a new adventure every time you visit."

In the beginnings of the center, the gym held separate classes for art, music, and gym, however, they have most recently launched a hybrid of all three classes called Tumble Tunes, a mix of movement and music where kids and parents can explore different instruments while they sing, dance and work on their rhythm skills.

"It is a very active and fun class", says Mike, "you'd be surprised how much the parents get into it."

On top of classes and open gyms, parents can also plan birthday parties for their children through Romp n' Roll's party services that include obstacle courses, moon bounce, rock climbing, trapezes, and of course all of the traditional birthday party games.

The response to Romp n' Roll has been overwhelming. An estimated 500 children visit their 4,000 square-foot facility each week. The demand is such that the Barnetts have decided to open a second Romp n' Roll in another Richmond location to accommodate for their overflowing clientele.

The classes are led by experienced teachers, many of whom have advanced degrees in early childhood education. During class, teachers will talk with parents about how their child is learning motor, sensory, cognitive, and social skills as well as give you ideas for how continuing their child's development outside of class.

Since the doors opened two years ago, Mike's family has also lent a hand in the company. His parents, Edmund and Linda Barnett - both Juniata Class of 1962, are entrepreneurs themselves and help to cross market Romp n' Roll at their Hallmark stores, while his brother Tim Barnett '86 works promotions and offers his business sense.

Having been self proprietors for most of their careers, the family advice is much esteemed; however, you might consider the real persons in charge to be the Barnett's children, ages 3 ½ and 20 months. No ideas are approved until they are first run by them; they were, after all, the muses for this successful business enterprise.

With a successful business under their wings, the Barnetts focus their energy and enthusiasm to the future of early childhood development and Romp n' Roll as they look to franchise the company.

Mike, CEO and father of two, takes a breather to cast a proud eye on his and his wife's accomplishments over the last two years, "Thank goodness it's a success because it would probably be just as much work if it wasn't."