Dolls Fulfill a Dream

By Art Carter

"Black is beautiful" is a slogan used by civil rights activists to install pride of identity.

It is also a slogan used to fulfill a dream — a dream that has become a reality for Shindana Toys, manufacturers of black dolls and games.

Dolls are a part of any child's dreams, but in the case of Shindana Toys, they are a part of a much bigger dream — that a company owned and operated by black people can make it in a white man's world.

Shindana Toys, based in Los Angeles, has come a long way since it was founded in the ashes of the Los Angeles Watts Riots of 1968.

"We've turned a dream into reality," says Lou Smith, 45-year-old president of the firm. "We're providing jobs with pride in the black ghetto and we're helping our people — and all people — to learn to love those who are different from themselves," he added.

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In California, Shindana is a division of Operation Bootstrap, a self-help business organization whose goals are to establish businesses in the ghetto whose profits serve the community. The firm began with one truly ethnic doll and now has 17 dolls in its line.

Last year, the Watts-based company acquired the Learning Tree and American Playmaker line of games and puzzles from Soular Systems, and is now selling toys in addition to the dolls.

Shindana profits support the recently opened Honeycomb Child Care Center in Los Angeles, and its big goal for the future is to gain sufficient funds to launch a University of Watts.

Smith and another black man, Robert Hall, founded Shindana without government subsidy. Initial capital and technical advice were provided by Mattel, Inc., with no strings attached.

The company's first product was Baby Nancy, a doll with facial features of a black baby — not a white doll with Caucasian features painted a chocolate color.

New Li'l Souls "Wilkie" and "Sis" joined the Shindana family as the smallest, but two of the most lovable—rag doll companions for both boys and girls. Both measure just 10 inches high and make fun-filled pals to hug and to hold.

Rhonda is a soft, cuddly rag doll dressed in the latest fashion — from her "big apple" hat to her sneakered feet.

Why black dolls? According to Smith, the reason for truly black dolls came from the findings of a black psychiatrist (Dr. Kenneth Clark) who found that black children, given a choice, usually chose white dolls over black.

This was seen as an expression of a lack of love and understanding these children had for themselves.

"Shindana has tackled one end of this problem by producing and marketing black dolls that both black and white children can learn to relate to at a very early age," declared Herman Thompson, director of sales and marketing for the firm.

'Both black and white children can learn to relate at an early age... with black dolls'

Shindana means "competitor" in Swahili, and the company is living up to its name, introducing eight new dolls at the 1974 American Toy Fair in New York City and making a big dent in the doll market with $700,000 gross sales in 1973, an expected gross of $1.3 million this year, and a hoped-for $2 million sales in 1975.

Smith says 60 per cent of their sales of black dolls is made to the white community, which, in his view, is indicative of the fact that the black dolls are playing a big part in the fight for equality. "This is a way of saying to children that all of us are alike," Smith emphasizes.

Strangely, according to Smith, the dolls are most popular in the South. But, as usual with black businesses, the old problem of distribution and marketing stifles rapid expansion.

The recent list of new doll introductions was topped by a talking doll who looks and sounds like Rodney Allen Rippy, the young black television star. Other dolls drink and wet, have soft-baby-like skin and real rooted natural hair.

The dream is coming true for

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