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## **Arterro: Two Resourceful Moms Bring Inspired Art Projects and a Sustainable Mission to Families Across the Country**

Arterro was founded in 2006 when Forrest Espinoza went searching for quality art activities to share with her two young boys. She was unable to find any kits locally or online featuring beautiful, eco-friendly materials and open-ended projects. Forrest wanted projects she would enjoy using as much as her children but

discovered most kits for kids used a lot of plastic. “The cookie cutter kits weren’t art-based or open-ended at all,” Espinoza says. “There was no creativity involved.” With her love of business and art, and experience in sales, she recognized an opportunity. She began developing the products she wanted to see in stores.

Originally intending on creating a small web store and selling mostly to family and friends, Forrest started testing out her art kits and having success selling them. Enthusiastic customers, raving about the unique handmade papers, colorful wool felt, and glass beads encouraged her to consider wholesaling.

In 2007, Forrest met Jennifer Conn, a freelance graphic designer, while they were both attending an open gym with their kids at the local community center. Looking for consulting help with marketing and package design, Jennifer was hired to revamp the logo, marketing materials and packaging. Forrest started selling kits to local Madison, WI stores. Sales were steady throughout 2007 and in January of 2008 Forrest decided to expand into the national market by exhibiting at the CHA (Craft and Hobby Association) trade show in Anaheim, CA. Interest in the product line grew and a couple of national distributors showed interest in selling the products. Forrest attended her second trade show that spring, the International Art Materials Trade Association (NAMTA) show in Reno, and won the “Best New Kid’s Product” award for her line of kits.

At this point, she realized things were getting big enough to move production out of her kitchen. Researching possible options for kit assembly and warehousing, Forrest decided to partner with Goodwill Industries in Milwaukee, WI. Working with a non-profit that supports disabled workers and job training programs was a perfect fit with the company’s sustainable mission. “The beautiful thing is, for one, they’ve been amazing working with us, because we have a very different product than they’ve ever had to work with before. So they’ve been very patient. And we started very small; we’re still a pretty small business, especially for them, but they actually love that because they want to help us. They want to help us grow. Also, our kits contain beautiful materials, so it can be very therapeutic for the people they employ,” said Espinoza

Jennifer had been hired along the way to design additional marketing and packaging projects and to help consult with business strategy. Recognizing they had a unique blend of skills, a great ability to communicate with each other, and a passion for growing the company, they officially became partners in July of 2008.

Geared up for a big holiday season with several large accounts showing interest and big investments in inventory and production underway, Forrest started her big sales push. “It was frustrating because everyone was saying no, telling us they had a freeze on buying any new inventory out of uncertainty about the economy.” Buyers were interested yet unwilling to gamble on a new product line. Sales were much slower than anticipated. Forrest and Jen decided to take the time to revamp the marketing materials and hone the company message and strategy. A new logo was developed, more dynamic packaging designed, four new products were created and tested, and a brand new beautiful website went live.

The marketing efforts paid off and enthusiastic art, craft, and toy store buyers started ordering. In May 2009 Artterro exhibited again at NAMTA, winning “Best New Kid’s Product Award” for the second year in a row, this time for the newly introduced Canvas Storybook Kit. The turning point, though, was when they decided to introduce the product line to the specialty toy industry at the annual ASTRA trade show in June of 2009. Artterro exhibited with an incredible turnout. The booth was busy non-stop with many buyers excited to learn about the products and write opening orders. Two kits were nominated as finalists for ASTRA’s prestigious “Best Toys For Kids” award program and the Creativity Kit won TD Monthly Magazine’s Top Toy award in August.

By the end of the 2009 holiday season, Artterro kits were in over 300 stores across the country and the partners expect that number to at least double in 2010. “Families are looking for this kind of product,” says Jennifer. “Many people are spending more time at home, wanting meaningful activities to do with their kids. Parents are carefully deciding how to spend their money and are looking for value.”

Forrest puts price high on the list of priorities when designing a new kit. She says, “We want these kits to be affordable. We want this to be for a family. Making it affordable is number one for us. There’s a lot of value built into one package.” Describing mainstream art material manufacturers, Forrest continues, “What I realized right away was that with the packaging, we didn’t have to put it in a big fancy box with a lot of printing. A lot of money is being spent on the box and it goes right into the garbage. Then I realized we were able to spend a lot more on the materials and we didn’t have to put plastic or acrylic in a kit.”

A big part of Artterro’s mission is to make art accessible and enjoyable for families, even those who don’t describe themselves as artists. “I just think being creative is so important and it’s a human need. Being able to make something that you can give to someone else is also important.” Great care is taken to source unique, high quality materials to instill a love of art at a young age. “Kids appreciate quality materials, and when you start with something that is beautiful, whatever you make is going to be beautiful,” states Jennifer.

The co-owners of Artterro have structured their company to provide flexibility as they each raise two children in their respective households. Recently, they hired a bookkeeper who is also a work-at-home mother. “It is all part of our sustainable mission,” says Jennifer. “Environmental responsibility is a beginning, we are mindful of the resources we use when creating all our products. Sustainability, though, encompasses a broader picture. We are responsible to our community, our employees, and our customers. When we create a kit, it needs to be something that makes life better for everybody involved.”

Forrest adds, “We want to be healthy people so we can make good decisions. We share the workload, but we also share what’s going on with each other and our life. It is a lot of work, having your own business, but it’s something we really love and I think we have the right talents for what we’re doing and that is what drives us. And we believe in the product we’re putting out there and it’s fun to sell.”