



flying high
down to earth

BY MINDY SINK // PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK PISCOTTY

SITTING IN THE LARGE, WELL-APPOINTED HOME of Julie Aigner-Clark and taking in the spectacular view of the Rocky Mountains to the west, there is no doubting her financial success as the founder of the Baby Einstein Company. Yet Aigner-Clark is as casual in this glamorous setting as she is about the phenomenal wealth that her notions for mixing classical music and hand puppets brought to her family. »





On a late summer day, Aigner-Clark

sits here barefoot, radiant, and smiling in a colorful skirt and t-shirt that reads, "If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say..." talking about what success means to her, joy, surviving breast cancer, and trying to make a difference in the world.

"Certainly, having a lot of money allows you to do a lot of things that can help you to be happy," she says. "But I've met a heck of a lot of people with a lot of money who were very unhappy. So certainly, money does not make success."

FOUND AMBITIONS

Aigner-Clark didn't set out to be rich and famous, or even an entrepreneur.

"It started out of a desire I had for a product that didn't exist," she says modestly of the company she launched with \$15,000 that was grossing \$25 million in sales a mere five years later. "And it turned into a business."

This simplicity of recognizing her passions as opportunities has guided Aigner-Clark's life, and ultimately made her an award-winning multi-millionaire who is now a household name to countless parents and budding entrepreneurs.

The only child of an electrician and a secretary, Aigner-Clark grew up in a suburb of Detroit where she independently developed an interest in poetry—*The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe sparked that love—and classical music she heard on the radio as a preteen. She became the first person in her family to attend college and got her first teaching job in 1989. When her teacher's salary wasn't enough, she found work training teachers to use new laserdisc technology. Through that work, she met her husband, Bill Clark. The two married in 1992 and had their first daughter, Aspen, in 1994.

It was after she left teaching to raise her daughter, that the then 30-year-old Aigner-Clark realized she wanted to combine her teaching skills with parenting. Her aim was to first share her love of classical music, poetry, art, and literature in a fun way with her daughter, and then with other children as well. "It was about giving your baby joy," she says.

In 1996, there was no market for baby videos and Aigner-Clark could not find what she was looking for—simple images combined with beautiful music. So, using borrowed recording equipment and family savings, Aigner-Clark made the first Baby Einstein video in the basement of her Georgia home in 1997. "The first video took over a year to make," she says with a howl of laughter. "And it was so simple."

Her second daughter, Sierra, was born in 1997 and her children have always been her top priority. So when the company started to take off, Aigner-Clark reviewed the three things that consumed all of her time—family, business, and housework— and easily made a decision where to cut back.

"Of course, it was the laundry," she laughs. "I got help with the housework, which was fabulous. But I didn't do that until three years into the business." She is hard-pressed to offer practical advice beyond that, except to keep priorities in order. "The really important things are not the things you can buy, the really important things are your health, your family and the people that you love," she says.

Despite all the talk of love and being a mom first, Aigner-Clark knows how challenging it is to hold it all together each day. "There are certainly those moments where you're so stressed out, the phone is ringing, the cake is burning in the oven, your baby is screaming and you just want to run away from home," she admits.

But ultimately, she says, "When you love what you're doing, you find a way to make it work."

AN OVERNIGHT SENSATION

By now, Aigner-Clark had seen how much Aspen and her friends loved the video. With no marketing or merchandising know-how, she headed for a toy tradeshow in New York City hoping only to get her video into the hands of anyone who worked for the Right Start stores. After two days walking the floors of the Toy Fair, she saw a woman wearing a Right Start nametag and gave her the video, fully expecting a call the very next day. After a month and no word from Right Start, she called the company headquarters and asked for "Wendy," the

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only name she remembered from the Toy Fair. Using this minimal connection, Aigner-Clark was able to speak with another woman at the company who could help. That woman found the video and watched it with her nephew. He liked it and the company decided to buy 100 videos for six stores.

The videos sold out in the first week at Right Start, and the Baby Einstein Company went on to make \$100,000 in their first year. Her garage became her distribution center, where she packaged and shipped thousands of videos.

The Right Start asked for another video, and Aigner-Clark produced Baby Mozart in 1998. The timing could not have been better: A study came out at the same time touting the “Mozart Effect” which claimed increased learning ability while listening to Mozart’s music. Sales of the Baby Einstein videos were primarily propelled by word-of-mouth between parents—mainly mothers who told each other how much their little ones loved their Baby Bach or Baby Mozart videos.

By the second year of business, the company’s sales were \$1 million. Her husband, Bill Clark, had an entrepreneurial streak—he started a medical answering service with his buddies and then Optical Data, a laser video company which was a precursor to DVD and CD-Rom technology—and he joined the business full time as chief operating officer and chief financial officer.

Now that the Baby Einstein Company was successful, the couple decided to move to Colorado and continue building their business. By the time Disney Publishing, a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company, approached them in 2000 to produce board books with the same themes as the videos, Baby Einstein was doing \$4.5 million a year in sales.

Along the way, Aigner-Clark was given the Ernst & Young “Entrepreneur of the Year Award” in 2000 (an honor her husband received for Optical Data in 1990), as well as *Working Mother’s* “Entrepreneur of the Year Award” in three categories that included Most Philanthropic Company, Most Innovative Business, and Best Small Company.

As exciting as the company’s meteoric rise was, the stress was beginning to take a toll on the family. Additionally, there was increasing competition from much larger companies now investing in the baby entertainment business.

ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES

“When Baby Einstein became really successful five years into the company, my husband and I made a very conscious decision to sell the company because it was beginning to take too much time away from our personal life,” says Aigner-Clark. “And we defined our success by how we were spending our time here on this planet, in this life.”

The couple approached Disney in 2001, because they already had a working relationship with that company, and named their price.

“Here we were, fortunate enough to have created this successful company that we could sell, but certainly we didn’t have to sell,” she says. “The year that we sold Baby Einstein, we did nearly \$25 million in sales. We could have hung onto the company and I’m sure we would have made more money the next year, we would have done more in sales, and we would have kept working harder and harder and harder.”

Instead, it was at this moment that the couple decided to let go of their big success.

“We just stood back and said, ‘OK, first of all, this is way more money than we ever thought we’d have in our life!’ We just said, ‘Let’s just do it. Let’s just sell it, let’s take this large amount of money and now what can we do with that money to enhance this great life that we have?’”

The couple sold Baby Einstein in a multi-million dollar deal that included Aigner-Clark working in a consulting job with Disney. No longer running a business, Aigner-Clark was able to return her focus to her family. However, it wasn’t long before she found herself with a new passion and the same old drive.

“My children were a little older, they were becoming more independent, they were spending time with friends and away from home,” she says. “I wanted them to know





how to be safe if they were in a situation that could be potentially dangerous.” Much like with Baby Einstein, Aigner-Clark first looked for an existing product to buy. “I was just so stunned that there was nothing in the market that would help me teach them these really important lessons,” she says. “At least in a fun way for them.”

And so she launched The Safe Side, a not-for-profit business that has created Emmy award-winning films about keeping children safe. Again, the stars seemed aligned for her success when she got an unexpected call from John Walsh, host of *America’s Most Wanted* and a daytime talk show. He was looking for mom entrepreneurs to interview, so Aigner-Clark agreed to do the show if Walsh met with her privately afterwards to discuss her new business idea. His response, according to Aigner-Clark, was, “If you can make Shakespeare fun, I think you can make anything fun!”

Walsh, whose young son Adam was abducted and murdered in 1981, is the founder of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Washington, D.C. Not only did Aigner-Clark’s company spend more than \$1 million to produce The Safe Side films, but sales proceeds go to the Center.

“When I started Baby Einstein I didn’t know how to make videos, I had no experience in film production at all,” says Aigner-Clark. “But I found that I had this knack for putting stuff on video that kids like to watch. So when I started The Safe Side, I felt like this was a way for me to give back not just monetarily, but I was also able to create something that was giving to kids in a way that nobody else had done before. The product was very philanthropic in and of itself, and then the proceeds were also being used to help children.”

LIFE’S LITTLE CURVEBALLS

Just as Aigner-Clark was gaining momentum with production and editing of films for The Safe Side in 2004, she discovered a lump that turned out to be breast cancer. At age 37, Aigner-Clark quickly chose to have a double mastectomy and some treatments, thereby avoiding chemotherapy.

“It sounds so cliché, but it’s true. It gives you a new perspective on life,” she says today. “I mean, what a way to really understand what a gift it is to be alive and to be on this planet.”

Taking stock of her life, her incredible success and now fortune, Aigner-Clark knew what mattered most to her. “I had all this money from the sale of my company and then I got breast cancer, and I would have given all that money away to have had my health back,” she says. “I know it’s really hard to remember when you’re in a situation where you’re really broke or you can’t make your mortgage payment, that ‘oh, I’ve got these really wonderful kids and a great husband and my health!’ But speaking from somebody who didn’t have health for a while, I would have thrown all that money out the window to buy back my health and never have had cancer.”

She took eight months off from business to work on her health instead, and then she jumped right back into working full time. “I started working really hard again, and it wasn’t until about two-and-a-half years after my diagnosis, that I sort of stepped back,” she explains. “I was getting really stressed out at work again.”

Believing that stress caused her cancer, Aigner-Clark realized she needed to reassess her life and priorities once again. “Having had that cancer, I just sort of stepped back and said, ‘Whoa! That was a huge wake-up call!’ You can forget because you can get wrapped up in your daily life again and the business starts to consume you.”

Aigner-Clark’s life had fallen out of balance again, like it did during Baby Einstein’s peak. By focusing so heavily on work, she was sacrificing her health and her family. She had again become consumed by the business and something had to give. While she had a passion for The Safe Side, she asked herself what truly made her happy. “That’s part of success, remembering what makes you happy,” she says. The answer was right where she left off—teaching.

“I missed being in the classroom. I missed being with kids that age and listening to them,” she says. “I mean, who in the world teaches middle school for fun? I do! I don’t do it for the money, that’s for sure.”

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In 2006, she began teaching a literature group at her daughters’ school. “I really wanted to teach *Lord of the Flies* again,” she says. And she will start teaching part time in November as a volunteer at a creative-learning school in Denver, Colo.

Aigner-Clark has been able to balance her work and family life by disciplining herself. “I’m an early riser, so I get up and I work hard not to get on the computer,” she says with a laugh. After she makes breakfast, packs lunches and drives her daughters to school—often in her pajamas—she gives herself office time until she needs to pick her daughters up again in the afternoon. “When you work at home, it’s hard not to go in the office.” Still, her hard-and-fast rule is no calls after 6 p.m., so that the family can enjoy time together.

While her family—especially her children—has inspired all of her work, Aigner-Clark is most influenced by those who give back. Her own heroes are not CEO’s or people striving for material gain, but volunteer workers—specifically hospice workers or people who work at animal shelters. “People who just do it because they love it and they care about it and you know they just don’t go shopping and go to lunch every day, I think people like that are the biggest inspiration for me,” she says.

She is trying to pass on this philanthropic spirit to her daughters in an imaginative way. “For each birthday, we let our children pick a cause that they believe in,” she explains. “And our kids always pick the Cat Care Society!” The birthday girl then makes a list of items her charity needs—cat litter, cat food, and such—and includes that list in her party invitations. After the party, the girls drop off all of the supplies.

“It’s a neat lesson to teach your kids,” says Aigner-Clark. “They’re kind of involving other kids in being philanthropic, which is very cool.”

GIVING BACK

Now 41, a cancer survivor and stay-at-home mom, Aigner-Clark is still motivated to create products and share with the world in some way. She has become involved in the Pink Ribbon Foundation, a nonprofit organization that assists cancer patients, particularly with funds for alternative therapies.

“For somebody else, it might be never working another day in their life,” she says. “But the truth is, if you’ve worked really hard at something that you loved, like I did with Baby Einstein, it’s really hard to just step back and not do anything anymore. I found that I felt like I was making a difference with The Safe Side, teaching I feel like I am making a difference, and with Baby Einstein I felt like I was making a difference. That defines success for me, if I was making a difference in somebody’s life.”

Altruism was always a part of the Baby Einstein Company while Aigner-Clark was in charge, with sales going to various charities such as the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee and the Autism Society of America. Both of these organizations are close to Aigner-Clark’s heart as she is a proud animal lover and also has friends with an autistic son.

In January, Aigner-Clark was recognized by no less than the President of the United States for all of her hard work. Sitting by First Lady Laura Bush, Aigner-Clark and Aspen listened as President George W. Bush told the nation that “she is using her success to help others,” in his State of the Union speech.

It is no surprise to learn that Aigner-Clark’s creative juices are flowing again as she has stumbled across yet another missing niche market—family travel TV shows. If she successfully pitches her idea to the Travel Channel, she will again be combining her loves—time with family, travel, and sharing knowledge with others.

Putting her passions to work is what defines success for Aigner-Clark. By prioritizing her life family-first, and maintaining a sound balance, she has realized all her dreams. “I think success is really about finding what it is that makes you joyous,” she says. “And being able to do that.”

