



Woody Friend (I)

When our family moved to Japan in the mid-1980s, we arrived with just what we could carry. I had my daughter Fumi on my back in a carrier and led her sister Himi by the hand, while their mother had a backpack with some basic necessities. That was it. We rented an apartment, I advertised for students for some in-home English classes, and we were up and running in our new life.

The apartment was of course absolutely bare at first. We had very little money, but the community around us provided much of what we needed to get started. The neighbours provided hand-me-down clothes (of excellent quality) for the girls, and I was able to get some furniture from a 'swap system' provided by a community center (donate what you can, take what you need). Within the space of just a few days, we felt completely integrated into our new community.

Of course we had not been able to bring many toys with us. The girls had each been told to choose their favourite plush toy, and those, along with a couple of favourite books, had been all they had when we arrived. It was completely impossible for us to buy any new ones for them, but that wasn't necessary; directly across the street from our new home was a large 'home center' store. I picked up a few simple tools and some scraps of wood, and set to work to make some toys.

I use the word 'toys' but I wasn't thinking so much about 'playing' as I was about 'learning'. As neither I nor the two girls could read or write any Japanese at all, this was an excellent opportunity to get started with that, so the first few things I made were sets of kana characters to play with. I made them in puzzle form, so that the characters could be arranged in various ways: dictionary order, by colour, by phonic group, etc. etc.

These were hugely successful, not just with my own children, but with all the other children who came over to play. And there were lots of these, because over the following months our wide empty room, unobstructed by furniture, and full of interesting wooden toys, became a kind of 'drop-in' center for local mothers with their children.

One side benefit of this was that the toys I made were all subjected to immediate real-life testing. I would bring a finished toy into the room, and within minutes, I would learn if it was going to be successful, and whether or not it had any problems. If a toy became broken, I could instantly understand why, and how I could improve it.

It wasn't all language training though; I started to make other types of toys too. Some were re-creations of things I remembered from my own childhood, and others were new designs of my own. But nearly all of them had some kind of 'puzzle' aspect to their design - not so strong that the child would feel that it was a chore to play with the item, but just enough that there would be a good learning aspect to the play.

It was great fun, both for all the kids, who had a constant stream of interesting toys to try out, and for myself, who had the challenge of coming up with successful ideas for them. And of course, you can guess what happened next; seeing their children playing happily with one of my toys, the mothers would ask, "Would you make some of those for us?"

And so the 'Woody Friend Toy Company' came into being ...

(continued next week)

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