

A TOY STORY



Entrepreneur **Julie Kerwin '95** is making waves in the toy industry with a line of inspiring girl-friendly action figures

designed to empower.

By Liz Krieger

Back in 2012, Julie Kerwin '95 noticed something curious

happening every time her two young sons went on playdates. Whenever the boys would gather at the homes of their female friends, the playdate would end with the girls dressed as princesses and the boys bounding around as sword-wielding knights, ultimately rescuing the damsels in distress. But when the playdate was at Kerwin's house, where they had plenty of action figures to go around, "all the kids would end up as knights, or wizards, often using various action figures as part of their pretend play," says Kerwin.

Thinking further, it hit her: There were few female action figures on the market, particularly figures that felt right for kids. "It was impossible to purchase a female action figure—including Catwoman and Batgirl—that wasn't hypersexualized: Boobs were often bigger than waists; legs were impossibly long relative to bodies," she says. "And their rear ends were as wide as the Grand Canyon! These were not appropriate toys to put in the hands of a child—because they weren't being designed for them!" In fact, Kerwin notes that men make up the vast majority of comic book readers and buyers of collectibles, and they gobble up action figures just like kids do.

Reflecting on how she could come up with something that was actually meant for girls, "I realized that it wasn't about superheroes; it was about *superpowers*," says Kerwin. By superpowers, she meant the traditional kind, like superhuman strength or x-ray vision. But she was also thinking of more meaningful character traits, including bravery, ingenuity, creativity, industry, and persistence, to name a few. And thus her idea was born: to create a new, better line of action figures—which she dubbed IAmElemental—to help inspire a new generation of girls.

A CHANGE IN COURSE

That wasn't the first time Kerwin pivoted in her career—and life. After graduating with an English degree and teaching credential from Wellesley College in 1992, Kerwin decided not to go into the classroom, as she'd been planning. Instead, she enrolled at Fordham Law School, hoping that earning a law degree could help her improve the education system in America.

"I have always believed that a strong education is the key to everything," says Kerwin. "I myself was the beneficiary of an excellent public school education in the Philadelphia suburbs. I decided that I wanted to work legislatively at the state level, focusing on educational public policy to change the system state by state, to improve education for all kids."

At Fordham, Kerwin discovered that she loved learning the nitty-gritty of the law. She also became curious about family law as a way to use her degree to help. But a formative childhood experience held her back. “My mother died when I was 8. That was the single most transformative event in my life. It changed everything,” she says. “I did take a Family Law class with the fabulous Deborah Batts [who **passed away** in 2020], and it felt like something I might be able to pursue that would be as fulfilling as educational public policy. But in the end, I decided that it would be too hard for me to choose a career focused on all that could go *wrong* with families—that the emotional toll would be too great.”



COURAGE

Indeed, by February of her first year at Fordham Law, she made the unsettling decision that she didn’t want to practice law at all—which turned out to be oddly freeing. “Look, I took a constitutional law class where I wrote my final ‘paper’ as a screenplay for a children’s after-school special about schools censoring books,” says Kerwin. The class was with the late **Father Charles Whelan**. “He was amazing. I loved it. But even more than the class, I loved that he was flexible enough to offer up the option of turning in something creative, though I made sure the legal perspective was woven into the story. And I got an A-minus!”

A WOMAN WITH A VISION

One of Kerwin’s clearest childhood memories is the day her mother sat her down to read her *Free to Be ... You and Me*. “I also had the record, which I would play over and over again. My mother believed in the empowerment of women. She told me that I could be anything I wanted, and I believed her. And my father embedded exactly the same messages into my brain.”

But having lost her mother as a young child also informed her choices about when to work, not just what she’d do. After receiving her law degree, she found herself really wanting to be a stay-at-home mother to her first child. As she dipped her toe back into the working world, she first became an indie music label producer for several years. And then the idea for IAmElemental came bubbling to the surface.



INDUSTRY

Kerwin didn’t hesitate as she began outlining her new company’s mission, intensively researching everything from the competitive toy market to brain development in children. As a trained lawyer, she registered about 30 potential website domains, including IAmElemental. One reason for that name: Kerwin printed out a blank periodic table of elements and repurposed it: “I filled it in with the attributes I wanted these characters to embody,” she says. Kerwin dubbed her first series the “Courage” line, with seven Joan of Arc–inspired

action figures to choose from. “Joan of Arc is associated with bravery in the face of long odds.” The figures include Bravery, Energy, Industry, Honesty, Enthusiasm, Fear, and Persistence, the latter featuring a cascading blue cape, meant to reference an ocean wave “because we get knocked down, but we always get up,” says Kerwin.

For Kerwin, creating a line of action figures was about empowering the next generation of real-life heroes. “When you make a choice to do the right thing, the hard thing, the kind thing, you are being powerful too.”

“I learned a lot about attention to detail while at law school—that’s part of the legal ethos. I use my law degree constantly.”

From the start, Kerwin envisioned female superheroes with realistic bodies. “Less hooters, more heroine” is how she puts it. In May of 2014, Kerwin and her former partner (who stepped away after the development phase) launched a Kickstarter campaign. Within 48 hours, the company had raised \$36,000 and was fully funded. By year’s end, *Time* magazine named IAmElemental both one of the Top Ten Toys of 2014 and one of the 25 Best Inventions of the entire year.

But Kerwin is modest about that accomplishment. These days, you need not have an MBA, a background in toymaking, or extensive factory contacts to produce and market toys as an independently owned company.

Instead of moving into a potentially risky production run, Kerwin tested her hypothesis through that crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter to see whether there was an actual market for her idea. “As soon as we knew there was, we were able to work through all of the details with our factory in China via email and Skype.”

Kerwin also remotely monitors IAmElemental’s inventory in warehouses in California, New Jersey, and the U.K. “And I sell product—both retail and wholesale—to customers around the world on my web page.” That said, a worldwide pandemic hasn’t been the easiest thing to navigate for many businesses—but she says that in some ways, they were very lucky. “Our reserves were in a relatively good place pre-pandemic. I’d hoped to produce our long-awaited Wisdom figure this year. But I suspect that it may be 2022 before we are able to get her made.”

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Kerwin also had a secret weapon at home: her younger son, now 15, but 7 when she began developing the toys, who was very invested in the creation and success of IAmElemental from the outset. “Everything is vetted through his lens,” says Kerwin. “For example, when I was creating the design for Ingenuity, he suggested I take a look at octopus videos online, because they happen to be very good problem solvers. After seeing videos of them actually opening jars filled with food, I created an octopus claw as Ingenuity’s unique accessory.”





It's not surprising then that Kerwin, mother to two sons, feels that it's just as important to put strong, healthy action figures in the hands of boys as well. "We are girl-targeted but boy-inclusive," says Kerwin. "You can't teach gender equality by teaching only one group what it means to be a powerful woman."

Clearly, her lessons have been resonating with a large audience. Within a year or two of creating IAmElemental, which now includes booklets, lunchboxes, workbooks, picture books, and board books, there have been discussions with Hollywood about turning her creation into an animated series, which Kerwin hopes comes to fruition as soon as she can spend some time in Los Angeles to have more meetings.

LESSONS OF A LEGAL EDUCATION

When agreements and contracts hit her desk, her training at Fordham can feel essential. “I am in a much better position to read a contract and know what needs redlining. I learned a lot about attention to detail while at law school—that’s part of the legal ethos. I use my law degree constantly.” Whether it’s protecting intellectual property in the various countries where her figures are trademarked, or reading the many contracts between vendors, employees, factories, and more, Kerwin is grateful to be well versed in the language of law.

And her connection with Fordham continued, in a family way, when her eldest son, Liam, went on his study abroad through Fordham at the London Dramatic Academy. “He was in the new Fordham London Centre facility in Clerkenwell just after it opened in 2019,” says Kerwin, “and had a fabulous time. The program—which has ended, sadly—was a wonderfully run, transformative program, and I am so glad that he had the opportunity to experience London in such a special way. He also made lifelong friends, many of them Fordham students.”

Kerwin encourages potential lawyers-turned-entrepreneurs to apply the key lessons she learned at Fordham Law, whether or not they ever see a courtroom. “I think entrepreneurs are often more celebrated for their risk-taking than for their obsessive overpreparation,” says Kerwin. “Lawyers, on the other hand, *have* to overprepare; their very livelihoods depend on it. Does overpreparation and overdelivery help keep you in the game longer as an entrepreneur? I would argue that it does.”

Another key bit of advice: Never pretend to understand something you don’t. “Maybe it’s because we’re two lawyers [Kerwin’s current chief operating officer is also an attorney], but we never fake it.” Kerwin recalls that during her first year at Fordham, a fellow female student marveled at her willingness to speak up in class, to raise her hand and participate or ask questions. “That’s just what I’ve been doing my whole life.”

As the pandemic continues to unfold, Kerwin is sanguine about how even something like an action figure can help ease some of the loss and sadness. “We created a Courage T-shirt and donated all of the profits to help feed frontline workers, and we digitized our *Special Edition Courage & Wisdom Workbook* and made it a free download during the pandemic,” she says. “Our action figures are more than a toy—they’re a talisman, and the message embedded within is empowering during times like these.”



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