

The Barbie doll raised the role of women from homemaker to businesswoman — equal to men in all professions

By Bianca De Sousa

Bianca is a student at St. Francis High School, Sacramento. She submitted this paper as her entry in the 2009-2010 National History Day competition. She worked under the direction of Vic Pitton, of the school's Department of Social Studies. CCHS considers papers on a subject centered in California for publication. The Barbie doll was "born" in El Segundo (a beach community in Los Angeles County) in 1959. After 50 years, it is still her "home," despite her worldwide influence on the life and status of women.



Bianca De Sousa

For 50 years and over 100 careers, the Barbie doll embodied “girl power.”¹ From fairy to fashionista, princess to president, Barbie inspired generations of girls to dream, discover and explore a world without limits — all without ever leaving their playrooms.² Barbie led by example, inspiring girls to live out their dreams and encouraging them to aspire to obtain whatever they wished.³ More than just a fashion expert, Barbie encouraged girls to imagine themselves in and “try on” different careers and personalities.⁴

Ruth Handler, who invented Barbie in 1959, changed the face of corporate leadership as the only woman in the boardroom, as well as the shape of dolls in the toy industry.⁵ She recognized the importance of playing and pretending in children’s lives.⁶ In researching the marketplace, Ruth discovered a void and determinedly filled the niche with a three-dimensional fashion doll.⁷ Many manufactured paper dolls dominated the market in the early 1950s, but Ruth noticed that many girls focused their attention on one type of doll: grown-up women.⁸

Ruth spent years convincing her designers, including her husband, Elliot Handler, cofounder of Mattel, that a market for a mass-produced, adult doll truly existed.⁹ Barbie debuted at the American International Toy Fair in New York in February 1959.¹⁰ In a 1977 interview with *The New York Times*, Ruth said, “Every little girl needed a doll through which to project herself into her dream of her future.”¹¹ She created Barbie, hoping to inspire, empower and encourage girls to reach for their dreams.¹² The innovation of the Barbie doll inspired girls to pursue their dreams, capacitated change in the role of women, challenged male opinions on woman’s role and empowered independence.

Watching her daughter, Barbara, playing with friends in the early 1950s, first brought the idea of Barbie to Ruth’s mind.¹³ In an interview for Barbie.com, she said, “I had observed my daughter, Barbara, playing with her friends on the floor. By the hour, they would play with adult paper dolls, and they would reflect their dreams of their futures through their play.”¹⁴ Figuring her daughter knew more than the supposed experts about what little girls wanted, Ruth created Barbie, naming her after her daughter.¹⁵ After Mattel advertised Barbie on television, Barbie’s sales skyrocketed.¹⁶

From 1961 to 1964, Mattel also produced: Barbie’s boyfriend, Ken, who was named after Ruth’s son; Barbie’s best friend, Midge; Barbie’s little sister, Skipper; Barbie’s car and Barbie’s Dream House.¹⁷ Barbie gained tremendous fame as a global icon; furthermore, sales of Barbie resulted in Mattel becoming America’s top-selling toy company.¹⁸ In half a decade, Mattel sold more than half a billion Barbie dolls — more than a billion Barbie, Ken and Skipper dolls — in more than 140 countries.¹⁹ Ninety percent of all American girls in the last 40 years owned at least one Barbie, and if every Barbie doll ever manufactured were laid end to end, they would circle the earth three-and-a-half times.²⁰

Barbie’s various careers took her from the boardroom in 1963 to outer space in 1965 to the classroom in 2002.²¹ She competed in NASCAR races in 1998 and ran for president in 2004, accomplishing everything with grace and integrity.²² Barbie created her own industry with several best friends, a boyfriend, a three-story dream house, a glamour jet, a cruise ship and a fleet of convertibles.²³ She purchased all these assets herself because she worked hard and tried her best in all the jobs she acquired.²⁴ Barbie, more than just a blond beauty, possessed all it took to achieve success, like any of her male counterparts.²⁵ In 50 years she switched jobs 108 times, mirroring women’s changing roles.²⁶ Her exploration of all careers, especially those dominated by males, revealed how far women had advanced in half a century and reflected the aspirations and possibilities for each succeeding generation of girls.²⁷

After World War II, a revolution in plastics began and Barbie fit right in with her synthetic parts.²⁸ In the 1950s, the toy industry discovered that children were the sole consumers of their products and assumed a “child-as-consumer” attitude.²⁹ Advertisements appealed to younger children and consumerism rose; thus, families in suburbia were buying more toys.³⁰ To keep up with this rise, Mattel’s in-house designers provided the doll with 100 new outfits each year.³¹ World-famous designers Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Dior, Valentino, Perry Ellis, Oscar de la Renta and Bob Mackie

created clothing for Barbie over the years.³² From 1959 until 2009, Mattel used over 105 million yards of fabric to create Barbie's clothes — making Mattel a huge consumer of cloth, as well as America's fourth-largest maker of women's clothes.³³

In the early years, Barbie's fashions and accessories reflected the more traditional role of many women as wife, mother and homemaker.³⁴ These fashions included wedding dresses and football game apparel, representing what society deemed appropriate activities for young girls in the 1950s.³⁵ These fashions exemplified the values and beliefs of middle-class Americans during that time.³⁶ In addition, Barbie owned a tennis outfit and ballerina tutu; society considered these recreational activities acceptable for Barbie to participate in at the time.³⁷ However, as years progressed, Barbie's fashions changed to reflect an increase in independence of women.³⁸ Barbie broke out of her traditional world and blossomed into Astronaut Barbie in 1986 and Dr. Barbie in 1988.³⁹ She also symbolized a transformation from lowly secretary to big executive in 1963.⁴⁰ In 1964, Graduate Barbie proved that a woman could obtain an advanced education degree.⁴¹

Through the annual marketing of accessories depicting various career choices, Barbie motivated girls to dream about their futures in the competitive world of business. Barbie, always ahead of her time, ventured into medicine, business, entertainment and sports to prove that women could achieve their dreams in most careers.⁴²

Ruth Handler believed the philosophy underlying Barbie was that, through the doll, girls could achieve any dream.⁴³ In her autobiography, she wrote, "Barbie has always represented the fact that a woman has choices."⁴⁴ Through Barbie, Handler emphasized that girls should pursue any career in any field and reach for jobs no women had yet attempted to fill.⁴⁵ In 1965, when Astronaut Barbie debuted, girls imagined Barbie walking on the moon and staking a claim for the United States.⁴⁶ Four years later, while on the Apollo Mission, America's Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon — the first ever to perform this amazing feat.⁴⁷ In 1963, Executive Barbie debuted just as Congress passed the first Equal Pay Act.⁴⁸

In 2004, President Candidate Barbie made her third bid for the Oval Office, just four years before Hillary Clinton vied for the White House.⁴⁹ Girls who played with Barbie voted on Barbie.com to establish which political issues were most relevant to them and Barbie listened.⁵⁰ Presidential



In 1965, nearly two decades before the first American woman went into space, Barbie appeared in astronaut garb.

Candidate Barbie's platform included the most popular planks: creating world peace, helping the poor and homeless and taking care of animals.⁵¹ Barbie gave girls voices and taught them to vote for issues important to them.⁵² Girls' imaginations faced no limits when playing with Barbie; therefore, each girl imagined independence and success for her own future.⁵³

The inventor of Barbie used her business experience and sense of independence in her life as inspiration for Barbie, who represented an atypical woman. Ruth Handler looked up to her sister Sarah her entire life.⁵⁴ Sarah's business savvy impressed Ruth the most and in her autobiography she wrote, "My older sister was a leader in the business world. She helped me believe that I, also, could do that."⁵⁵ Sarah inspired her younger sister never to fear success or self-reliance and Ruth used this inspiration in creating Barbie.⁵⁶ She wanted girls to admire Barbie the same way she admired her older sister.⁵⁷

Always different from female peers of her generation, Ruth filled the role as one of the first prototypes of the American superwoman — a whirling dervish of mother, wife and career person.⁵⁸ Probably no other woman in America in 1944 would think about holding the job of senior executive in a growing commercial business.⁵⁹ Even with two children, Ruth balanced her work and home life expertly.⁶⁰ She loved to work and feel the empowerment of providing for her family.⁶¹

Ruth offered generations of women a true champion of their gender: a woman who thrived in a male-dominated business environment while still finding family time.⁶² Her busy, yet rewarding, life inspired her to create Barbie as an American superwoman like herself.⁶³ She knew other women could be independent, powerful superwomen and aimed to inspire younger generations to strive for that goal.⁶⁴

The innovation of the Barbie doll created a shift in the roles of women by moving away from work in the home, toward work as independent businesswomen. Eighty percent of all dolls manufactured in 1959 were baby dolls.⁶⁵ Thanks to Barbie, that figure plunged to 38 percent, six years after her release.⁶⁶ In the postwar era of the 1950s, girls were encouraged to hold marriage and motherhood as their highest aspiration.⁶⁷ As a result, baby dolls dominated the market.⁶⁸ In her first four years, Barbie held female-centric careers. In 1963, hoping to shatter the silence on women's unhappiness in the home, Barbie hit the boardroom as Executive Barbie to prove women equal to men.⁶⁹ In March 1996, the Census Bureau found that women owned one-third of all United States businesses, employing 26 percent of the nation's work force.⁷⁰ Sales from the eight million women-owned businesses jumped 236 percent after 1987, and employment in those businesses rose to nine million workers from only seven million in 1987.⁷¹ According to the National Foundation for Women Business Owners, the number of woman-owned companies increased 78 percent during nine years, while growth among U.S. firms gained only 47 percent.⁷² These statistics prove that Barbie's debut and rise in fame directly correlated with the rise of

women in the work force.⁷³ Barbie helped inspire an age of feminism.⁷⁴

To summarize: inspired by her daughter's play, Barbie's inventor created Barbie as a self-sufficient woman who worked outside the home to provide for her family. While at home one day, Ruth Handler realized, as she watched her daughter Barbara play with paper dolls, that the young child never pretended to do maternal tasks, like taking care of babies, with her dolls — contrary to the expected play pattern with dolls.⁷⁵ Instead, Barbara chose to play with one-dimensional cutout dolls as opposed to her many roly-poly baby dolls.⁷⁶ In the mid-1950s, the U.S. market mainly featured baby dolls, with which little girls pretended to fill the role of mommies.⁷⁷ Barbara Handler differed from her peers because she imagined her doll as a hip teenager who got "all dolled up" and went to high school proms and sock hops.⁷⁸ In the early 1950s, Mattel's team of all-male designers rejected Ruth when she presented the idea of a three-dimensional adult doll.⁷⁹ They insisted that little American girls only wanted to emulate their mommies and play with baby dollies.⁸⁰ Even Elliot Handler, usually warm and supportive of his wife, was pre-occupied with creating a talking baby doll called Chatty Cathy.⁸¹ These men failed to understand why a woman would ever want independence.⁸² Ruth finally succeeded in convincing Mattel to give Barbie a shot.

Mattel introduced "Barbie, Teen-Age Fashion Model" to skeptical buyers at New York's annual Toy Fair in 1959.⁸³ Never before had these buyers seen a doll so completely unlike the baby and toddler dolls popular at the time.⁸⁴ All of the confusion surrounding Barbie proved how much society needed and desired her.⁸⁵ She showed the world that girls have the right to achieve their dreams outside the home.⁸⁶ Barbie showed the world that women possess skills beyond cooking, cleaning and nurturing.⁸⁷

At the time of her release, Barbie challenged established male opinions of women's roles as solely mothers in society. When she entered the field of medicine, Barbie never strived for a typical woman's job as a pediatrician or family doctor.⁸⁸ Instead, she pushed her way into the male-dominated field of surgery.⁸⁹ In 1972, the Title IX decision guaranteed girls equal access with boys to athletic facilities in schools.⁹⁰ Olympic Champion Barbie debuted three years later, encouraging girls to dream big and go for the gold.⁹¹ Barbie brought home gold medals for gymnastics, figure skating and downhill skiing, just like Gold Medalists Nadia Comaneci and Dorothy Hamill achieved the following year.⁹² Barbie truly broke into the male-dominated business world as an executive, first in 1985, and then again in 1992 and 1999.⁹³ Between 1989 and 1994, Barbie enrolled in the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines — making a place for herself in one of the last male-dominated fields.⁹⁴ Barbie reminded girls that being a woman was about more than having a pretty face.⁹⁵ She busied herself as a TV news reporter, a UNICEF ambassador and a veterinarian.⁹⁶

Barbie's creator faced adversity from men who failed to understand why girls needed to imagine their futures as independent women. The all-male design staff at Mattel told Ruth that the doll would never sell.⁹⁷ They disliked Barbie because they failed to find the point behind her.⁹⁸ Society's archaic views on the maternal role of women influenced this opinion.⁹⁹

After ordering more dolls from Japan just before Barbie's debut, Ruth hit another wall of male resistance.¹⁰⁰ At the New York Toy Convention, many potential buyers voiced their negativity toward Barbie.¹⁰¹ Ruth stayed strong and calmly asserted that girls just wanted to grow up and should have a chance to choose what job to hold besides homemaker.¹⁰² The different buyers said almost the exact same thing each time: "Ruth, you've made a major mistake with this doll. Little girls want cutesy, cuddly baby dolls. They all want to pretend to be mommies."¹⁰³ Ruth created Barbie despite the adversity she faced because she believed in the doll.¹⁰⁴ She paved the way for women's rights.¹⁰⁵

An organization asked Ruth to speak as a business representative at a private club and, when she arrived, a security guard escorted her through an alley and then a kitchen.¹⁰⁶ She felt confused as to why she had to enter the country club through the back door.¹⁰⁷ Later, she found out that the club would not allow women inside.¹⁰⁸ She physically crossed the barrier between males and females and symbolically became equal to the males inside the club.¹⁰⁹ This innovative act, one of many in her life, inspired the spirit of Barbie.¹¹⁰ Although Ruth was mistreated because of her gender, she never let it slow her down.¹¹¹

When Ruth first came up with the idea of the Barbie doll, she sought to inspire a new generation of successful and independent women. Ruth's daughter, Barbara, and her friends never played with the popular Betsy McCall doll who was their age and engaged in normal activities of a typical pre-teen.¹¹² Instead, the paper dolls that came inside comic books drew their attention.¹¹³ Girls dressed these in different outfits they had designed themselves and paraded them around like fashion models.¹¹⁴ The way the girls held the thin cardboard figures up like puppets and carried on conversations about adult life as they imagined it, fascinated Ruth.¹¹⁵ She saw that they were seeing themselves in the role they imagined for the doll.¹¹⁶ They were also mimicking adult conversation.¹¹⁷ The cardboard cutout dolls came with a changeable paper wardrobe, but the clothes attached to the dolls with frustratingly ineffective tabs and never looked right.¹¹⁸ The dolls themselves were one-dimensional and simple, the barest tools for imagination.¹¹⁹ In her autobiography, Ruth wrote, "They were so ugly and clumsy and had child bodies for grown-up play situations, it just did not go."¹²⁰

Ruth envisioned a more sophisticated version of these dolls, more obviously a woman and more lifelike.¹²¹ In her autobiography, she wrote, "One day, it hit me. Wouldn't it be great if we could take that play pattern and three-

dimensionalize it so that girls could do their dreaming and role-playing with real dolls and real clothes instead of the flimsy paper or cardboard ones?"¹²² Ruth recognized that experimenting with the future from a safe distance through play aided in the growing up process.¹²³ Handler created Barbie solely to help young girls play out their dreams.¹²⁴

The creator of Barbie experienced numerous moments of empowerment as a woman in 1950s society and, therefore, sought to create similar empowerment in girls through inventing the Barbie doll. Few women in American corporate business of the pre-feminist 1960s received as much praise or as high regard as Ruth Handler.¹²⁵ As the chief engineer of Mattel's success, she attained a status virtually unprecedented for a woman in American business.¹²⁶ In her autobiography, she wrote, "In those days back when I started in the business, there were no other women running a company...In retrospect, the fact that I was a woman was sort of an advantage because men didn't know how to react or read me."¹²⁷ Ruth used her femininity to her advantage and came out on top in the world of business.¹²⁸ She wanted all women to feel the way she did — powerful and free; Barbie became the tool that Ruth used to spread her joy in achieving her wildest dreams.¹²⁹

Ruth Handler moved up from executive vice president to president to co-chair of the board of directors of one of the largest and most recognized companies in the world, Mattel.¹³⁰ She received countless honors: first female vice president of the Toy Manufacturers Association, outstanding Business Woman of 1961, 1968 Woman of the Year in Business by the *Los Angeles Times*, first woman named to the Business Advisory Council by President Nixon in 1970...and more.¹³¹ In 1973, *Fortune* magazine included her on its list of the 10 highest-ranking women in business.¹³² The various awards and recognition given to Ruth showed the public's acceptance and support for what she represented: a strong, independent woman.¹³³ All this fame ignited her passion to make the Barbie doll a representation of her own victory.¹³⁴ Ruth truly put her own spirit into Barbie.¹³⁵

The Barbie doll and her creator, Ruth Handler, inspired girls to pursue their dreams through Barbie's various occupations and Ruth's many business triumphs. Ruth and Barbie brought change in the roles of women by rejecting traditional maternal roles and pursuing rigorous careers.

Many males schemed against Ruth and her creation but together they overcame all adversity by proving their worthiness and equality to males in a male-dominated society. Barbie and Ruth truly embodied the passionate essence of women's independence and rights because they never feared the battle against society's opinion. Barbie and Ruth are victorious because today women have the power to pursue their dream, persevere through hardship and truly become accepted, autonomous and auspicious in society.

NOTES

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53. Jones, *op. cit.*
54. Alan Farnam, "Ruth Handler," in *Forbes Great Success Stories* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 69.
55. Handler, *Dream Doll*, *op. cit.*, 102.
56. Farnam, *op. cit.*, 69.
57. *Ibid.*
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59. Farnam, *op. cit.*, 70-71.
- 60–64. *Ibid.*
65. Aaseng, *op. cit.*, 89.
66. *Ibid.*

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68–69. Ibid.
70. Gale Institute, “Women’s History,” Gale Cengage Learning, http://galecengage.org/free_resources/whm/timeline/1762.htm (accessed September 25, 2009).
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94–96. Ibid.
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Preservation foundation's 2010 meet in rural area was a first

California Preservation Foundation's (CPF) 35th annual meeting this past May was held — for the first time — in a rural setting, Nevada County, chosen for its historic Gold Rush environment and state parks. Called the Miners Foundry Cultural Center (the Pelton wheel was made here), Nevada City was the center of the education sessions. CPF offers statewide technical support, advocacy and education. Go to www.californiapreservation.org for information on CPF.

From editor's perch (Continued from page 6)

The purpose of this tour of the home was definitely unique and an approach that other museum and historic site curators might well learn from. Kim Giuliano, Historic Properties Coordinator for the City of San Ramon, had worked hard to create a tour that would really grab the attention of visitors.

Her talk sounded fine to her but she wanted other opinions. She recruited the curators for a test run to get honest feedback from people who had given lots of tours. Her orders were to listen carefully and then dissect her performance. She wanted to know what parts of her talk were good, what parts were a total bore and what anyone thought should be expanded or dropped. The discussion that followed was honest and valuable. What a neat approach to learning.

The willing sharing of knowledge and experience has always been a major goal of CCHS and should be a continuing responsibility of historical organizations. There isn't much point in knowing something if you don't share it with others.

Ostrich farming (Continued from page 18)

and there is hardly a tourist who has not visited this institution." The text also made reference to the many awards that Cawston Ostrich Farm had won over the years.

As war clouds spread over Europe, the shipment of plumes dried up. However, in the United States they remained at the same level. Apparently women's styles had not changed.

Edward H. Cawston passed away in England on June 29, 1920. With the millions he made selling ostrich plumes, he lived well. He returned to South Pasadena twice to see how things were going before his death.

While the Cawston Ostrich Farm had prospered for a quarter century, it fell on hard times during the Depression. Business slowly began to taper off following World War I, but not to a level where there was a problem. In 1934 the farm was sold at an auction to pay off debt and two years back taxes. The Cawston Ostrich Farm finally closed its doors in 1935. It took an additional two years to sell off some 50 ostriches, the remaining equipment and the property. Thus ended one of Southern California's prime tourist attractions.