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Toys to the Rescue

My husband's massive toy collection
was driving me up the wall —
until the COVID-19 pandemic

by **AMY PATUREL**



SUPER FAMILY
 “My husband tells our sons that Spider-Man is a favorite character because Peter Parker thinks of his family first,” says writer Amy Paturel.

My husband, Brandon, our three boys and I have lived in our home for three years.

We have a formal living room, a guest bedroom and a roomy linen closet. But we’re still renting a storage unit to house Brandon’s overflow of action figures, Pez dispensers and Batman memorabilia—the items that couldn’t fit inside our garage.

“When do you think we’re going to empty that unit?” I asked on a weekly basis before the pandemic, doing the mental math on what a few vintage objects might be worth on eBay.

But last summer, when California’s shelter-at-home order was in place, Brandon’s trips to the storage unit became welcome outings. He’d drive the kids to the unit, return with a stack of boxes and unload them on our dining room table, each kid taking a turn at guessing what was inside. A Darth Vader LEGO set? Beatles action figures? It was a magical mystery tour for all of us, with each child hoping to uncover their favorite characters. “It looks like Christmas morning!” I’d say on the way to my home office.

Brandon started the collection in 1996, when he was 18. It began with a motley crew of six *Star Wars* and Batman figures standing shoulder to shoulder on his bookshelf. Today his eclectic collection boasts 21 Obi-Wan Kenobis, more than 450 Pez dispensers, more than 20 Batman models and a six-foot-tall Styrofoam Spider-Man. “A family friend won that from

a Blockbuster Video sweepstakes in 2002,” he says of that last one. “She had nowhere to put it.” Nearly 20 years later, it’s still one of his most prized items.

As quarantine dragged on, the treasures in Brandon’s boxes occupied our boys for hours. Our sons took the toys out, mentally cataloged them and helped Brandon display them. Sometimes Brandon even let them play with the items that weren’t in their original packaging. For the boys, that was like winning the lottery.

TOYS WITH A STORY

As it turns out, Brandon’s toys are more than just action figures, models and novelties: They’re a vehicle for bonding. In addition to sharing the origin story of nearly every superhero, Brandon has taught the kids about Washington, Lincoln and other leaders through his collection of presidential Pez dispensers.

The education they’re getting from decades-old action figures isn’t about He-Man, *Star Wars* or even American history. It’s an opportunity for Brandon to give the boys an up-close-and-personal view of their father. He tells them that his brothers regifted him the Batmobile for Christmas in 1997. He reminisces about watching our niece, Cassidy, put together the 1950s muscle car in 2008. And he shows them the knight I gave him during our early days, with a message I penned on a sticky note still attached to the back: *Free training to prospective knights in shining armor.*

The boys have made their way into Brandon’s collection too, starting with the Halloween windup toys he and I played with while I was hospitalized during my pregnancy with our now 9-year-old twins (me in a wheelchair, him chasing after the Grim Reaper). He also kept the Mickey Mouse cake toppers that adorned our twins’ cake for their second birthday and the Elmo we received when our third son was born.

PASSING IT ON

The legacy Brandon will leave behind, hopefully several decades from now, will be something our sons understand. When the four of them sit around the table with boxes of toys, Brandon earmarks almost every item for a specific person. He has even started proffering some of his collection to our children. Last Father’s Day, Brandon gave each of the boys a Ninja Turtle complete with accessories. And on a busy day when I needed quiet, he gave them Transformers—Bumblebee, Optimus Prime and Shatter—to share.

I used to fixate on how much money and space his toy garage sucked up. On the fact that I can’t park a car in our garage—ever. And on the ever-present danger of knocking something over on the way to our freezer, one of the few non-toy items in his “man cave.” But in the midst of this global pandemic, I’m letting the toys take precedence.

While Brandon explains who the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man is and why he’s in the movie *Ghostbusters*, I watch all three kids sit transfixed. One of our sons leans over to grab the Ectomobile. The other two ogle a two-inch Peter Venkman. Brandon catches my eye with a smile as I pass through the room.

In the chaos of pre-pandemic life, I’d forgotten how my husband could build a narrative with perfect comedic timing, how he could impersonate everyone from the Shredder to Batman and how the most important experiences of his life were on display in his collection. The pandemic has been exhausting, but being on lockdown with a bevy of toys has brought us all closer together. Plus, by the time COVID-19 hits the history books, we may no longer need that storage unit. ★