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Lindsay Gaskins, CEO of Marbles: The Brain Store

# Marbles CEO has mindset for success and is playing to win

## Marbles' first iteration 'was a complete failure,' but undeterred CEO Lindsay Gaskins is leading company to dramatic growth

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Lindsay Gaskins, CEO and co-founder of Marbles: The Brain Store. (Rick Tuma, Tribune illustration / January 19, 2012)

By Erin Chan Ding, Special to the Tribune  
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The phone rings at the Bucktown headquarters of Marbles: The Brain Store, puncturing the tapping of keyboards and the whir of the heating system.

No one picks up, though,

until a woman with curly brown hair and hazel eyes, sitting at a desk in the center of the room, snatches a handset.

"Marbles: The Brain Store, this is Lindsay."

A pause.

"It's a warehouse. Are you delivering something?"

She steps forward and listens.

"Awesome, we're here!"

No one looks up or apologizes to Lindsay Gaskins, CEO and co-founder of Marbles: The Brain Store, for not answering the phone.

"It's not like we're working for this untouchable boss," said Marla Byrd, a staff accountant and one of Marbles' 154 full-time employees, most of whom work at the company's retail locations. "There's no caste system here. Lindsay comes in, and she does the grunt work and she projects the future. It's a leadership thing. It's refreshing."

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It's an involved, personal style of leadership Gaskins said she will strive to maintain as her company evolves.

"If you're going to do something like this, you have to be willing to do everything," she said. "I want a good culture in my company, where everyone lends a hand. It's part of who we are. I hope it doesn't change as we get older."

Marbles began in October 2008 with one retail location in downtown Chicago, grew to four locations in 2009, then eight in 2010. It ended 2011 with 18 stores in the Chicago area, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Minnesota and Massachusetts, as well as a growing online presence. This year, Gaskins' goal is to open 10 to 15 more stores on both coasts.

"Right now," Gaskins said, "has been the best time ever in my career."

Amid that growth, Gaskins gave birth to her first child, Louise Gaskins Barnard, nicknamed Lulu, 21 months ago with her wife, Laura Barnard.

"There's more of a reason for me to be successful," Gaskins, 35, said of how becoming a mom has changed her perspective. "There's Lulu and there's my family that I want to do well for."

Weekday mornings at Gaskins' and Barnard's sunlit, third-floor condo in Wicker Park involve a 6 a.m. wake-up time and thrice-weekly, three-mile jogs for Gaskins.

On a recent Friday morning, Gaskins and Barnard spent several tranquil minutes flipping Lulu, who erupted with giggles several times before Barnard, 31, dashed out to her job in marketing for Wrigley's Skittles brand.

"We have the best jobs ever: toys and games and candy," Gaskins said.

But her business did not always represent a bustling enterprise of games. The first iteration of Marbles survived only three months.

In May 2008, Gaskins was working for Sandbox Industries, a business incubator based in the West Loop. She and co-worker Karen Luby started Marbles by opening a kiosk at **Woodfield Mall** in Schaumburg.

The idea for the company came from Luby's mom, Catherine Luby. Amid baby boomer concerns about aging, "my mom was saying she wished there was a place that people could get together and do something about their brains," said Luby, 28, an associate brand manager at Unilever in New Jersey with no stake in Marbles.

Nick Rosa, a co-founder of Sandbox Industries and still a key investor in Marbles, said the kiosk was meant to help Gaskins and Luby test the market in a less-expensive format than a store.

"We went and did the kiosk," Rosa said, "and it was a complete failure."

Even though the venture sputtered, Luby said, "I have a lot of memories of us at 2 a.m. at Woodfield Mall trying to fix the kiosk and rearranging. Lindsay had so much energy in trying to make that thing a success."

There's a story Gaskins' mother, Stephanie Gaskins, 72, likes to tell about Lindsay's perseverance.

Lindsay's parents live in Ipswich, Mass., where Lindsay graduated from high school. Her mother said a retired local football coach still chats with her about something her daughter pulled off years ago.



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In 1995, Lindsay was captain of her basketball team at Ipswich High School that won the state championship. Afterward, "she was determined to ride the fire engine with her team through town," her mother said, but she was told that honor was only for the football team after big wins.

"Guess what? Lindsay and her team rode the fire engine through town," Stephanie Gaskins said. "She's the one who would get it done."

Gaskins, the fourth of five children, might have inherited some of her executive qualities from her father, Darius Gaskins, once president and CEO of Burlington Northern Railroad, now BNSF Railway Co.

"She's always been a very persistent person," said Darius Gaskins, 72. "When she believes in something, she pursues it aggressively."

Central among those things was Marbles. What resonated with Gaskins during the short life of the kiosk was that people who stopped and put their shopping bags down enjoyed interacting with Marbles' games and puzzles; the setup didn't give them space to fully engage with the products.

She figured a brick-and-mortar store would.

In October 2008, in the depths of the recession, the first Marbles store opened, at 55 E. Grand Ave. in downtown Chicago, financed in large part by the Sandbox Venture Fund.

"Anybody who would know anything about retail would think that we were absolutely crazy to launch a business in fall of 2008," Rosa said.

Even so, the store worked. People wandered inside. They played. And then they bought.

Since then, annual revenue for Marbles has about tripled every year, said Gaskins, from \$250,000 in 2008 to \$1 million in 2009 to \$3 million in 2010. The company ended 2011, she said, with revenue slightly less than \$9 million.

Because the company is focusing on rapid expansion, Gaskins said, Marbles has yet to become profitable, meaning that the nearly \$200,000 it costs to build out each store must be financed by investors.

Still, Gaskins envisions an exponential expansion of Marbles stores. Motivated by swift sales at Marbles locations in [Water Tower Place](#) and Woodfield Mall, she is targeting 100 major malls in America.

All Marbles locations allow ample room, usually in the center of the store, for customers to put together puzzles or flip through quiz cards or manipulate game pieces, each designed to stimulate critical thinking, memory, visual perception, word skills and coordination.

Marbles produces its own games — about 30 so far, with a goal of 25 more this year -- as well as selling games by other manufacturers.

Staff members at each store are called brain coaches, and they approach customers by offering to demonstrate products, which often results in several minutes of play.

"There's more of a shift back to the small mom and pop shop where people again want that personal touch," said chief merchant and co-founder Scott Brown. "We do not just want to be a toy store, but a brain health store, and it's a white-glove experience in that we are trying our very hardest to match each customer with products for them and their brain."

Gaskins said she is "a firm believer that challenging your brain with game play and other stimulating activities can benefit your brain," though she added that Marbles does not make scientific claims about its products.

Dr. Marek-Marsel Mesulam, a neurologist and the director of the Cognitive Neurology & [Alzheimer's Disease Center](#) at [Northwestern Memorial Hospital](#) in Chicago, said the brains of animals like rats respond to enriched environments, such as cages festooned with brightly colored toys.



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Rats placed in those environments, he said, show a thickening of the cerebral cortex, as well as brain cell growth. Rats that had been displaying components of Alzheimer's disease, he added, showed a mitigation of the effects of the disease when placed in an environment with colorful toys that could be analogous to games and puzzles.

But "when it comes to human brains, things are a lot messier," Mesulam said. "There really is no proof that playing games of any kind improves memory or brain function, even in regular people or in people with Alzheimer's disease. But we do play games and do activities here in the center, and we do that on faith, given what we know about the animal laboratory and common sense that this is a good thing."

Part of the reason for the lack of proof, he said, could be that the rigor of studies performed on rats cannot be replicated on humans. As brain imaging evolves, he expects more to be known about the plasticity of human brains with regard to games and puzzles.

On a Friday afternoon last month, Gaskins, having unloaded 10 boxes of games out of her Toyota RAV4 at Woodfield Mall and gulped down a Jimmy John's BLT, tied on the black apron worn by the brain coaches and emerged on the retail floor.

She sidled up to Jill Nangle, 59, of Hanover Park, who picked up product after product, trying to find gifts for her four grandsons.

Gaskins asked her what they liked to do, and Nangle said they loved sports. One of them had picked up an interest in art.

She guided Nangle through the 250 products Marbles sells to a Buddha Board, which can be painted on repeatedly with water. Gaskins shared that her 8-year-old nephew wanted one too. She then picked up a couple of OgoSport discs, demonstrating how they can serve as a way to work on coordination. Nangle also picked up an OgoSport package and deposited it at the cash register.

Nangle left the store about an hour later. Her purchases totaled about \$500.

"Someone like her is our perfect customer," Gaskins said.

In addition to her leadership qualities, her no-pressure sales demeanor and the parts of herself she critiques — "I'm not a great communicator," she said — Gaskins said she is aware of her position as a gay female CEO, though she does not want that aspect to define her.

"I don't have, like, a gay flag on my chest when I go into a business meeting," she said. "But I'm open about it, and people are surprised by it. It's not assumed someone's gay when you meet them."

Gaskins met Barnard in Chicago eight years ago while they played in a recreational basketball league. Both had been captains of their college teams, Gaskins at [Wesleyan University](#) in Connecticut and Barnard at [Harvard University](#) in Massachusetts.

On the court, Barnard said, she noticed how often Gaskins passed the ball, which she felt reflected a cooperative spirit that drew others toward her.

"She is such a natural leader. She just has it in here," Barnard said, tapping the side of her head. "It's not, like, this dictator-type, selfish leader. There's a generosity of time and effort. She rarely gets flustered or angry or extreme."

Their first date consisted of a long conversation after a basketball game, at The Lion Head Pub in Lincoln Park.

"We laugh, because it's the most fratty pub; it's a sports bar," Gaskins said. "But it was like, 'Whoa! We've been talking for three hours!' We fell in love."

They married at the [University of Chicago's](#) Quadrangle Club in August 2007. (Gaskins said they likely will obtain a civil union license from Cook County but are in no hurry to do so.) Almost three years later, they had Lulu, who has inherited Gaskins' chestnut curls.

On weeknights, Gaskins strives to get home before 6 p.m., the time the nanny leaves, so she can spend the rest of the evening with her family.

"She really has a lot of love for Laura and for Lulu," Brown said, "and you can feel that from her, and it's infectious in the culture of Marbles."

Toward the end of the workday, a little past 5 p.m. on a Friday, Gaskins drove back to the company's headquarters on North Ashland Avenue near the Kennedy Expressway overpass. She stepped inside the exposed-brick building, greeted by employees' questions of, "How was it?"

She answered that her visits to Marbles stores at Woodfield Mall and Lincoln Square went well, and her staffers gestured at the barricade of boxes around them.

The delivery Gaskins had chatted about on the phone that morning had arrived. Package after package of Mindstein and Mind Your Marbles, two of the company's creations, were stacked on the floor — 11,000 of them.

Gaskins laughed, taking in the piles around her. Then she headed for the boxes, hands outstretched, ready to help do some lifting.

Lindsay Gaskins

**Lindsay Gaskins:** CEO and co-founder of Marbles: The Brain Store

**Age:** 35

**Born:** Washington; raised in Texas, Minnesota and Massachusetts.

**Family:** Wife, Laura Barnard, 31, and daughter, Louise "Lulu" Gaskins Barnard, 21 months.

**Education:** Economics major at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn.; teaching certificate at the University of Texas at Austin.

**Previous positions:** Consultant at Boston Consulting Group; teacher and basketball coach at the Austin Waldorf School in Austin, Texas; and buyer for Sears Holdings Corp.

**Favorite game as a child:** Pitch, the card game.

**A favorite game found in Marbles:** Quarto!, a strategy game invented by Swiss mathematician Blaise Muller.

**On weekends:** Gaskins said she and her family are "exploring the city or going to a kid's birthday party. We get up at six in the morning, and our day is so much fun."

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