

Bend me, shape me: Asheville kids' hottest fashion accessory? Rubber bands

LOCKIE HUNTER • MAY 17, 2010

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ASHEVILLE — It began after dinner. The familiar request for an extra sweet or a delayed bedtime was replaced by a curious argument.

"That's my fairy," my daughter said. "You have a blue elephant."

"Then give me back my pineapple," my son replied.

Going to the site of the argument, I discovered my kitchen floor littered with a palette of small shapes, resembling thin, tiny cookie cutters. I picked one up, and it was flexible as — in fact, it was, simply — a rubber band.

Whether they're called Silly Bandz, Zanybrandz, Crazy Bands or something else, they're thin molded rubber in a dizzying array of colors and shapes, and they're worn by children as ponytail holders or as bracelets — sometimes by the dozen.

The appeal, apparently, is that they always return to their original shape when you take them off the item they're holding, or off your wrist: fish, hearts, princesses, train engines, trucks, crowns, shoes, and on and on.

Gary Green, owner of the Toy Box on Merrimon Avenue in Asheville, was perplexed at first.

"It took the sales rep one hour to convince me to order rubber bands shaped like animals," he said.

From themed packs containing tropical fruit to "rock band" packs (guitars, drum sets) to "mystical" packs (angels, mermaids, unicorns) these intriguingly shaped rubber bands are flinging off the shelves and into pockets and backpacks all over.

My 7-year-old daughter explains the intrigue in her best Valley-Girl-cum-Southern-Belle accent.

"They're, like, two in one, like they could be bracelets or they could be, like, little toys. You stretch them, and then you show them to your friends, and you can, like, sort them."

Trading mania

Green thinks they work along the same lines as Pokemon cards, with the potential for trade.

Andrea Giglito, a teacher at Claxton Elementary, first spotted them on third-graders about two weeks ago.

"The first-graders are beginning to wear them as well, and they have yet to be a distraction," she said. She added that they are definitely being traded.

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"It's important, as with any belongings, that I stress how trading works and what the expectations are when trading," she said. Some first-graders will trade for a certain period of time and then want their items back."

Jen Rennicks, a Claxton mother of one of Giglitto's students, said that her older daughter loves to trade with friends after school. "She enjoys counting them, playing with the shapes and comparing the colors. But arguments happen when sisters trade at home."

"We began hearing about them last fall," noted Erika Evers, co-owner of Dancing Bear Toys who bought her first packs before Christmas. "I like that it is a simple idea and inexpensive, much more so than other collectibles. They've recently just exploded in this area."

Evers was sold out last week.

"Supply is the problem," Green echoed. But not to fear: Both toy stores have several orders in from a dozen different companies that produce the bands now.

Collecting and teaching

It seems that first- through sixth-graders are the prime demographic for the bands. I recall fondly my love for collections in the fifth grade. From Fruit Stripe gum wrapper necklaces to "Battlestar Galactica" trading cards, collecting and swapping small items was a rite of passage.

Rennicks agreed. "At first I thought they were silly and paid them no mind. But now I watch them truly having fun, and it reminds me of the friendship beads on safety pins we made and traded back in middle school in the mid-'80s."

Angie Cullen's daughters were first introduced to the bands in Florida at Thanksgiving by their cousins. "We had not seen them here at all, and the girls had never heard of them," Cullen said. "The girls each got a pack — sea creatures since we were at the beach — and they still love them. They play with them like figurines when they are off, which is very fun."

Cullen added that her daughter's teacher at Issac Dickson banned them from her fourth-grade classroom, which Cullen thought was understandable, as the bands had become a distraction.

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Rennicks' daughters are aware that other classrooms have banned them, so they are careful to play only at recess and in the gym after school. "Or so they say," she adds.

Potential for distraction aside, many educators and parents see the bands as a teaching aid. "I think the bracelets are great and would be a good addition to our daily prize box," Giglito said. "I think they are a great incentive for good behavior because of their popularity right now."

Rich Rennicks, a Claxton dad, thinks they present the opportunity for many teachable moments: making good choices with money, attributing value and sharing. He was pleased to hear that both his daughters gave bands to friends who didn't have any so the children did not feel left out. Since the bands were given with no expectation, the act promoted a "pay it forward" mentality, he said.

Each pack contains two of each shape, fostering the idea of keeping a set and trading a set. Stacey Caskey, a fourth-grade teacher at Claxton, is all for any collectible that is within the price range of all of her students. "Everyone becomes part of the collection," she said.

So what's next?

Most parents agree that at less than \$5 a pack, the bands are an inexpensive hobby. "They are a good 'pay for with your own allowance' item," Cullen said.

One downside, Jen Rennicks said, is that you are paying several dollars for something that cost pennies when it was made in China as opposed to homemade friendship bracelet or beads. But she agreed that they are priced low enough for a child to save a few dollars of allowance money.

And they can be useful. "They are technically rubber bands, which can serve a functional purpose once the craze dies down," Rennick said.

The potential to trade is deepening as new styles are on the way.

"The next trend is glitter followed by tie-dye in mid-June," Green said.

I'm a glitter gal myself. Perhaps I'll wait for the glitter pack of famous authors. Virginia Woolf could be blue. Emily Dickinson a glittery red.

I envision days of trading with other writers. I'll trade my Whitman for your Dickens, but I may need to wait quite a bit for the Silly Bandz manufacturer to consider how to depict Longfellow as an elastic rubber band.

Lockie Hunter is a writer and a mother who lives in Asheville. Her first novel, "Girls, Girls, Out," was selected as a semifinalist for the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. Learn more at www.lockiehunter.com.

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