Maxine Clark  
Founder and Chief Executive Bear, Build-A-Bear Workshop

“I had a passion for retailing even when I was a young girl. At an early age, I recognized the importance of having exciting merchandise and providing an engaging store experience for customers. But I never realized how significant these feelings would be in my life. I started my retail career, like many college graduates going into retailing, as an executive trainee at May Department Stores Company. Over the next 20 years I held a variety of store and merchandise positions of increasing responsibility. In 1992, I became President of Payless Shoe Stores, then a division of May Department Store with over 4,500 stores and over $2 billion in annual sales at the time.

In early 1997, I decided to launch a retail concept I had been thinking about - Build-A-Bear Workshop®. While most retailers are merchandise driven, Build-A-Bear Workshop® offers highly interactive experiences like a theme park. It combines the universal appeal of plush animals with an interactive assembly line that allows children of all ages to create and accessorize their own huggable companions. We opened first Build-A-Bear Workshop® opened in St. Louis in the fall of 1997 and have now grown to over 200 hundred stores and in 2003, $300 million in annual sales.

The keys to our success are great merchandise, great people, and great store execution. These three factors combine to create an environment where families share quality time and form irreplaceable memories. Our passion for serving our guests is emulated by our dedicated associates, known as “Master Bear Builders,” who make every effort to ensure that each visit is memorable and enjoyable. Employees are empowered to make sure that every guest feels special every time they visit their stores. We have a company culture where great service and recognition are a daily occurrence. Ninety percent of guests rate the quality of experience in the highest two categories and 76% indicate that nothing could be done to improve their store experience.

We also believe strongly that we need to give back to the communities in which we have stores. For example, as part of our ongoing commitment to children’s health and wellness, we introduced a series of Nikki’s Bears to honor Nikki Giampolo, a young girl who lost her life to cancer. A portion of proceeds from the sale of Nikki’s is donated to support programs that help children maintain normal lives while they struggle with difficult health issues including cancer, diabetes and autism. To date, the program has raised nearly $ 700,000 for important children’s health and wellness causes.”