

IMAGINATION AT WORK



The creator of 9 to 5 Warriors on storytelling, perseverance, and the overtime it takes to bring an original idea to market in today's toy industry.

By Natalie Miller, Assistant Editor



If Brandon Braswell had known everything he'd face while launching an original toy brand, he may never have started. Fortunately, for fans of 9 to 5 Warriors, Braswell had no clue what he was getting himself into.

Back in 2012, years before the first office-supply oddballs would punch in, Braswell was simply a toy fan, raised on the bright colors and bizarre characters that dominated cartoons in the '80s and '90s. One day, while wandering the aisles of his local vintage toy store, Braswell wondered: "Will today's kids ever experience this kind of magic?"

"I felt like the kids growing up today didn't have that same originality and fun, wacky characters — something that just makes you want to go to the toy store so badly to see what's new," Braswell says. "I don't know why or what I was called to, but I knew I wanted to create that future nostalgia for the generation growing up today."

The idea became the foundation for 9 to 5 Warriors, an original action-figure line deeply inspired by the '90s oddball era. The series transforms everyday office essentials into a quirky cast of collectibles that battle it out in the breakroom after hours. Supported by an ever-expanding story straight out of a Saturday morning cartoon, 9 to 5 Warriors offered Braswell the chance to create that weird, imaginative world he felt was missing from modern toy shelves.

There was just one problem — he had no idea how to actually make a toy. But what he did have was much more important: a clear vision and a willingness to collaborate.

“[Brandon] knew the look he wanted, and he knew that he had to find the right people to execute that look,” says Azhelle Wade, founder of the toy industry training program Toy Creators Academy and Braswell’s longtime mentor. “And he knows where and when to spend his money... He needs an expert in this area, so he’ll find one. That’s just so smart.”

Leaning on his filmmaking background, Braswell spent years fleshing out the world of the Warriors — the Water Cooler Commandos and Break Room Bandits, the bored office worker who created them, and the magic energy drink that brought them to life. He created comic books, trading cards, and even commercials, all before ever holding a toy in his hands, because to Braswell, “Story is what builds that trust and connection, and connection is what lasts generations.”

Then, in 2020, he recruited Scott Hensey — a legendary sculptor whose work includes Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Street Sharks, and Exo Squad — to bring the characters into the third dimension by hand. The figures are deliberately simple, closer to the 5POA (five points of articulation) action figures Braswell grew up with than the hyper-posable collectibles of the modern era. “There’s something magical about [that simplicity],” he says. “The world is your playground.”

Collaboration is key to Braswell’s design process. He usually recruits artists, hands them mood boards, and lets them riff, bringing their own imagination and ideas into the fold. For example, Slice Age, the line’s bestseller, started as a giant, pizza-inspired dinosaur until one artist took it to the next level, giving the character a club-wielding caveman twist that Braswell never saw coming.

But as it turns out, getting the toys made was only half the battle. From factories and logistics to retail, “every single thing I have to do is a learning curve,” Braswell says. “I didn’t know what I needed to do, and as I started doing it, I learned, ‘Oh, I need to do this as well.’ I always wonder if I would’ve started this journey if I truly knew the end goal — the process, the amount of money. I probably would’ve never begun. So ignorance is bliss.”

Although Braswell’s first Kickstarter failed, his persistence paid off. Braswell regrouped, partnered with retailer BigBadToyStore to relaunch the campaign, and successfully brought

the figures to life. His second Kickstarter in November 2024 was even stronger, raising more than \$100,000 — until the 2025 tariffs brought it all to a screeching halt.

Overnight, the cost of finishing Wave 2’s production jumped by about 40%, a hit Braswell hadn’t factored into preorders. To make matters worse, larger companies rushed to get their shipments out ahead of the new rates, pushing smaller indie projects like Braswell’s further and further down factories’ priority lists.



Braswell (left) worked round the clock to bring the magic of '90s toys to today's kids. | Source: 9 to 5 Warriors

To Wade, it's this relationship with the consumer that makes independent companies like 9 to 5 Warriors so unique. "Larger companies tend to be led by the people they serve: the retailers," Wade says. "Indie creators are led by the people they serve, too, but that's usually the consumers directly ... They're creating toys that respond to society's current problems, needs, and feelings. They're so much closer to the end consumer, and their products just have so much heart."

For all the challenges that come with running an independent toy company, the most rewarding part for Braswell is seeing his “future nostalgia” idea proven right. “My kid loves it,” he says. “My kid never

With the tariffs now reversed, Braswell is working overtime on Wave 3 — new characters, a deeper story, and an eight-issue comic he's been developing since the early days — but his ambitions extend far beyond a single toy line.

"I want to be the catalyst of the next Saturday morning cartoon generation," he says. "Even if [9 to 5 Warriors] doesn't become anything but the spark of something else ... then my job is complete." ●



9 to 5 Warriors finds the magic in the mundane by transforming office supplies into original oddball action figures. | Source: 9 to 5 Warriors