

PLINER'S PLEDGE FOR PEACE

A DISTINGUISHED SHOE DESIGNER SHARES HIS STORY

By Tracy Block Photos courtesy Donald Pliner

In the past few weeks, Donald J Pliner has divided his time between design approval in Europe, shoe show prep in New York and a brief trip home for a family visit. He's currently back in NY putting the finishing touches on his Spring 2010 line to showcase at his showroom at the New York Shoe Expo, only five days away. Pliner's stress levels are surprisingly undetectable from what he refers to as "18-hour workdays," and for a renowned shoe designer/husband/father/philanthropist he's incredibly centered. Perhaps the success of his ever-expanding brand, coupled with the recent triumphs of his Peace for the Children Foundation, creates the perfect balance.

THE FAMILY MAN

Pliner and his wife Lisa were always wholeheartedly dedicated to the design and growth of the Donald J Pliner brand, and when deciding to expand their family and add a little one into the mix, they never anticipated the rough waters ahead. A few years ago, Donald and Lisa were faced with an unthinkable trauma: the loss of their child at birth. When the Pliners came to terms with the fact that they would not be able to conceive, they began sorting through international adoption plans and booked a visit to a Kazakhstani orphanage. "There are so many political problems with adoption [in Kazakhstan], and taking a child out of the country," Pliner says. "All of these babies are being born to drug-addicted women...

... And you look through the windows of the adoption houses at children of all ages who can't do anything but hope someone finds them."

Donald and Lisa first visited their soon-to-be daughter four years ago, where they were allotted only one hour a day for three weeks for visitation. Strict rules prevented the Pliners from taking their child outdoors. "If we put a barrette in her hair, they would shave her head," recalls Pliner. Seeing the harsh struggles the children faced firsthand left a lingering impact on the Pliners.

A STARR IS BORN

At 11 months old, Donald and Lisa finally brought their baby daughter home to Miami. They named her Starr Emmanuelle, "The double 'r' in Starr is for all the stars in the sky we had to pass so far to get her, and Emmanuelle, which means "god within" in Hebrew," Pliner says. But with the joy they experienced with a baby to finally call their own came reoccurring thoughts of the pain and turmoil children around the world were facing. The Pliners knew they had to do something to help the children, which became the long-time philanthropist's main priority.

One day, the Pliners took a fieldtrip to the Miami Children's Museum, where Starr Emmanuelle took her first steps. "She saw the children walk, so she walked," Pliner says. While watching the communication between children that day, the Pliners learned that with interaction, there's a will for peace. And soon, the Peace for Children Foundation (PFTCF) was born.

BREAKING GROUND

To begin, PFTC raised funds through Donald J Pliner women's shoe sales. With the purchase of any pair of shoes with a dangling peace sign accessory came the automatic donation of one dollar to the foundation (today, a portion of sales from all Donald J Pliner products – shoes, accessories and handbags – benefit PFTC).

After researching non-profit collaborations, the Pliners contacted KaBoom!, a national non-profit organization that builds playgrounds in order to promote play for the well-being of children. Eight months ago, PFTC joined forces with KaBoom! to build the first joint-effort, non-profit playground of its kind. The location: the Miami Children's Museum, where Starr Emmanuelle took her first steps. "As Lisa says, "I a child could have one day to play like everyone else, children can learn to communicate and play together, no matter religion or race, it can bring peace," says Pliner.

On Sept. 20, 2008, 175 volunteers spent less than seven hours to erect the Miami Children's Museum playground, and KaBooms' landmark 1,500th playground.

"Volunteers went through 25,000 lbs. of foundation without a mixer, 2,000 bottles of water, no bathroom breaks, and suddenly there was a playground," Pliner remembers.

Since then, Pliner has received tremendous praise throughout the community. "We really love the park and the schools and charters are so thankful for these kids to have a park to play in. The communication will improve their physical, mental and whole state of mind." In addition, the City of Coral Gables and Miami-Dade County declared September 19 to officially be known as Donald J Pliner Day. And, although Pliner is modest in accepting all the recognition, "Acknowledgement for the betterment of a people is always positive and wonderful."

***PFTC is currently planning additional partnerships with KaBoom! There are playgrounds in the works in Houston and perhaps Chicago, with hopes to involve President Obama and Oprah Winfrey in the near future.**