

Creative Stories

Kay Zufall

The story of a child's toy that began as a cleaning product



In the early 1930s, many homes were heated by coal-burning furnaces. While coal was efficient for heating, it also left a terrible residue of soot on the walls.

A soap company called Kutol set out to solve the problem with a new wallpaper cleaner. Their product was a soft, pliable compound, perfect for wiping away the soot that the coal-burning furnaces left on the walls.

But then heating transitioned from dirtier coal to cleaner electricity.

And Kutol's wallpaper cleaner seemed to have little value. Sales plummeted, and Kutol faced a major financial crisis.

But then a New Jersey nursery school teacher named Kay Zufall had a problem – and her creative thinking changed Kutol's fortunes.

She was looking for inexpensive ways for kids to make Christmas decorations. She read a magazine article about making Christmas tree ornaments with wallpaper cleaner and cookie cutters, and went to her local hardware store to buy a can of Kutol's product.

She knew that Kutol's wallpaper cleaner was non-toxic, because her brother-in-law, Joe McVicker, was one of the owners of the company.

She brought the dough-like material into her nursery school – and watched as the kids rolled it and cut out shapes for their decorations.

The kids loved it.

Kay also knew that Kutol was in financial trouble, and watching the kids enthusiastically play with Kutol's product gave her an idea. She called McVicker and suggested they begin manufacturing the wallpaper cleaner as a **child's toy**.

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McVicker loved the idea. He and his partner Bill Rhodenbaugh decided to name it "Rainbow Modeling Compound" until Zufall and her husband, Bob, came up with a more kid-friendly name: **Play-Doh**.

Play-Doh officially hit the market in 1955, and was available in three colours: red, blue, and yellow. White Play-Doh was introduced in 1958, when they came out with a four-pack.

Now Play-Doh is available in more than 50 colors, with dozens of accessories.

Over 950 million pounds, or more than 2 billion cans, of Play-Doh compound have been squished and squashed over the last six decades – eclipsing its previous existence as a wallpaper cleaner by light years.



Kay's creative idea for Play-Doh saved Kutol (who later sold Play-Doh to General Mills) – and has brought millions of children joy around the world.

Kay Zufall never made any money from Play-Doh – but she didn't seem to mind.

She said, "People ask us, You gave the name away? Well, who knew it would sell anything? Joe did the hard work, we had a part in it for sure, but if it hadn't been sold, it wouldn't have been anything."

Kay and her husband, urologist Bob Zufall, later founded the Zufall Health Center to provide affordable and essential medical treatment to the underserved residents of Dover, New Jersey. Kay Zufall died in 2014.