

are you game?

renewing
family fun
is **SimplyFun**

When SimplyFun founder Gail DeGiulio was growing up, play was important. Each week, her family gathered for family time – often around the table to play hearts, spades, gin, shanghai, cribbage, pinochle and any number of card games that were a little bit strategy, a little bit luck, and a lot of good fun. There was laughter, there was love, there was true family bonding. And no, they weren't watching "Leave It to Beaver." >>



BY ALICIA MANLEY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF HOBSON

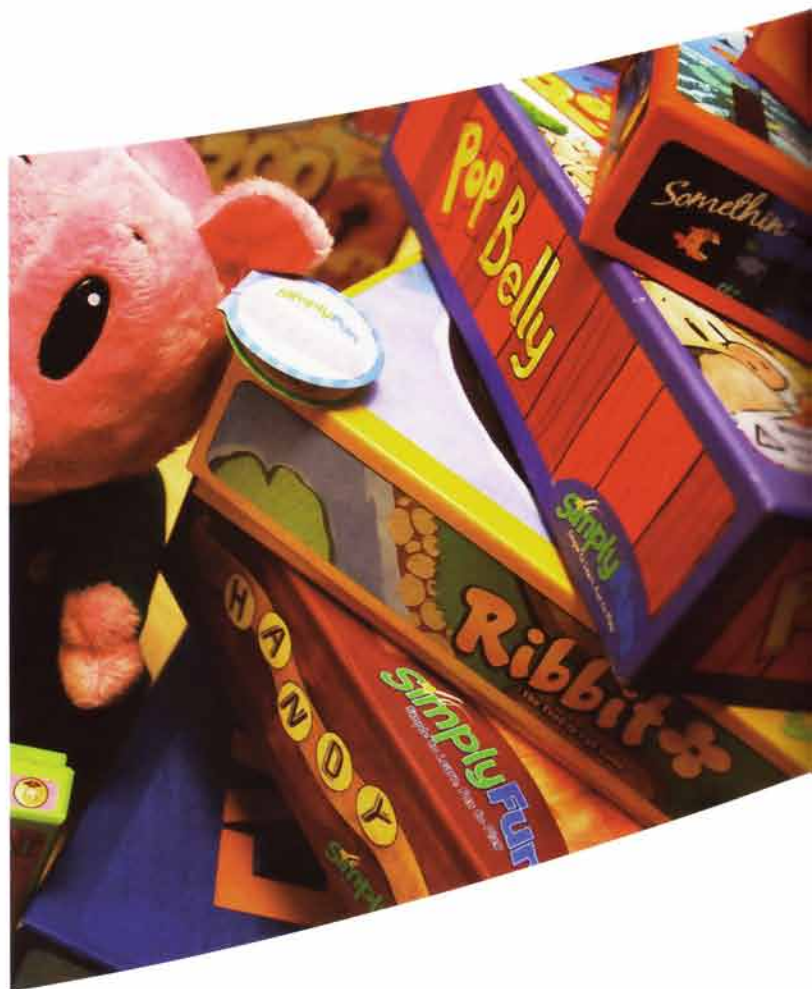


About DeGiulio

DeGiulio, 49, and her husband have been married for more than 20 years and have two children. She enjoys entertaining at home, hiking, skiing and spending time with her family and friends to "simply" celebrate the "fun" of life each and every day.

Currently the "Chief Funster" for SimplyFun, her previous executive management roles include, senior vice president, marketing for Classmates Online (now Online Interactive), vice president of marketing and mass market games for Wizards of the Coast (now part of Hasbro), and management positions at Microsoft Corporation and Toshiba America.

“Several peers of mine have left high-tech and started companies that have to do with games,” DeGiulio says. “Maybe all us Baby Boomers long for time to play ...”





<< It's a memory many seem to cherish: mom, dad, brothers, sisters, gathered around a game, sharing time and stories while playing. For others, family game time never entered the realm of possibility.

Where are the giggly youngsters who dance around the table with glee after winning, or the little girl who slyly "manipulates" the spinner on the Twister game to get Dad into some funny positions? Are they too busy? When did play become a dirty, four-lettered word?

DeGiulio's goal? To proclaim and reclaim the importance of play. She even developed a business around it, Bellevue-based SimplyFun. Her more than 25 years in management, marketing and business development in the game, technology and consumer industries prepared her for her role as "Chief Funster."

"We really focus on making play part of our mission," she says. "Promoting the importance of play to enhance the quality of life." The games in the SimplyFun collection are easy to learn and play, and managed to entertain a 5-year-old, mom and dad and the grandparents – with the same game. Whether it's a board game, a story, a bike ride or a walk around the block and some time at the playground, it's OK to have fun, she insists. "Don't make play a bad word; make it part of your daily routine."

In Germany, she explains, board game creators are superstars. Here? It's just hard to get a new game on the shelves, and new ones that do make it are likely marketing tie-ins rather than good games. In Europe, says DeGiulio, families often have six to eight weeks of vacation. In the United States? Here we're addicted to stare-at-the-screen means of entertainment and we're lucky to get two weeks of off. The long weekend has replaced the once-common two-week vacations. And family time? Family games? "People just don't have the time committed," she said. But she's hoping to change all of that.

finding balance

When DeGiulio and her husband moved to Washington, they were an oh-so-typical transplant couple. He worked for Boeing, she worked for Microsoft, and here a life they made. >>



<< “It worked out really nicely for both of us,” says DeGiulio, explaining how their family loves outdoor living and spending time being active. “My kids ski, they like to boat, to ride their bikes.” But after a while, she was ready for a change. She found herself forgetting to play. Between her children’s practices, her and her husband’s jobs, and life itself, “I found that I didn’t really spend the time playing games with my kids,” at least not how she remembered it in her childhood. So she readjusted her priorities.

“Several peers of mine have left high-tech and started companies that have to do with games,” she says. “Maybe all us Baby Boomers long for time to play,” she says, talking about the trend for those who have been inundated with high tech to suddenly be drawn to the high touch. “A lot of people are looking for balance,” she ponders. And so was she.

the writer’s review

When we first sat down to play “Walk the Dogs,” the grownups in the room flinched out of habit. We’d been burned by new games before. Games nearly impossible to understand. Games more about marketing than family fun. Games that lasted so long someone was bound to lose interest. We were a bit “game shy,” if you will.

The kids? They were instantly smitten the moment I set the box down. My 6-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son sat with grandma, and the grownups braced for chaos. We put on our “doing it for the kids” hats and took deep breaths. And we were all surprised the “5-minute” instructions kept their promise. Before we knew it, we were having a great time. Seriously. The kids. The parents. Grandparents. We were all giggling within minutes, and wanting to play again.

Where has this game been all my life?

The kids have fun just setting up the game’s 63 plastic dogs, especially giggly since the head-to-tail setup makes it look like the dogs are sniffing each other’s behinds. Total kid appeal there. (They snicker every time.)

Before long, the plastic figures are wound around the table and the cards have been dealt. The strategy levels differ from kid to grownup, but there’s enough luck as well as strategy involved that even the 4-year-old has managed to win a few games. Newcomers can be brought up to speed in less than the promised five minutes. And it’s so fun, no one seems to care whether they win or not ... which is a major win for moms and dads everywhere.

That’s how SimplyFun promotes the importance of play: With games and activities that are easy to understand and fun to play. Imagine that.

game on

First, she went to work for another Western Washington game company. And she learned a lot of good lessons. “Mass market retailers don’t care what the name of the product is,” explains DeGiulio. They’re just worried about space and sales. “We had great products, but it was hard to get them on the shelf,” she says. And when smaller “mom and pop” game shops and even mid-level businesses like Imaginarium and FAO Schwartz began to close their doors, the doors on new games began to get even harder to get through.

DeGiulio’s business partners, Jeremy Young and Matt Molen, also had ventured into the U.S. game market, trying to take European games and make them popular in the United States. But they also struggled to get new games in front of their audiences — even games that flew off the shelves in Europe.

And thus the ultimate question: How do you get games in front of people if you can’t get shelf space? The answer was to bring the games to them.

“I’d been to a scrap booking party,” DeGiulio recalls. And everything just clicked. The home-based direct-selling parties were obviously the best way to sell a line of family games. “That’s how you learn to play games — at someone’s home!”

And the numbers seemed to back up her hunch: One in six people has been a direct seller, explains DeGiulio. And those sellers are responsible for \$33 billion in sales in the United States alone; \$110 billion worldwide every year.

DeGiulio did her research, and is now a proud member of the Direct Selling Association, an organization whose membership follows a code of ethics and high standards, which the organization holds them to through regular audits, she says.

SimplyFun currently has more than 1,200 consultants in 47 states. Most are college-educated, married women about 25 to 50 who have chosen to stay home with the kids. “We also have a lot of couples,” says DeGiulio, commenting how that’s a bit of an oddity in the direct-selling business. “Direct selling companies tend to be women selling to women,” she says. But with games, it crosses gender lines; couples host together and men even take the lead. After all, this isn’t skin care, cosmetics or Tupperware we’re talking about — this is fun.

“What to me is very exciting is when I hear someone say that they’ve been trying to save for a house, and this allowed them to do it,” says a glowing and bubbly DeGiulio. “We’re creating entrepreneurs ... there’s no glass ceiling.”

Just like DeGiulio — she’s still reaching for the stars. In the next five years, her goal is to have more than 10,000 consultants and more than \$100 million in sales. And considering the

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start playing

For more information about
SimplyFun visit simplyfun.com
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company didn't exist until 2004, she's already come a long way. "If we do that, that means we've helped entrepreneurs to meet their dreams," she says. "They own their own family entertainment store; they're just bringing it to you."

pretty lucky

The new business seems to be working for her and her growing number of consultants.

"I think I'm pretty lucky," says DeGiulio. "I get to play for a living." And apparently her consultants feel lucky, too. "They say, 'Thanks for starting the company, because we love it,'" she said. But she tosses the sentiment right back: "I say, thank you, you're our boss." The company's success is a shared tale.

SimplyFun has focused mainly on indoor card and board games. But DeGiulio makes a point of getting out, traveling, and meeting with her consultants across the nation on a regular basis. And she's discovered some people play, gasp, outdoors.

Inspired by her warm-weather fans, SimplyFun has launched its first outdoor game called Woodchuck, and she looks forward to learning more about geographic interests and being able to tailor new games to meet demands of those in warmer climates.

She exudes the importance of play. Beyond helping her business grow and succeed, it makes DeGiulio happy to see families playing together.


more than boxes

SimplyFun started with five games in 2005. Two years later, there's a cache of more than 80 games, puppets and other activities. And they definitely cater to parents with "gift closets" by offering combination specials and packages perfect for parents wanting to do one-stop shopping and who want a closet full of gifts stocked and

ready for last-minute birthday party invites.

One of SimplyFun's games, "Let's Chat," was born out of experiences with DeGiulio's own children. "How's school?" she'd ask. "Fine," she'd hear back. It's a tale many parents tell. "Let's Chat" looks curious for a game – a key ring with several dozen small cards attached with a variety of conversations starters. "We keep it in the car; when we travel, when we're out and about, we take along the ring," says DeGiulio. "It's great for dinner parties, too. People say, 'We've talked about things we've never talked about before.'"

Another SimplyFun game is "LIEbrary," a creation by actress Daryl Hannah, who is an avid game designer in her spare time. DeGiulio had met her before SimplyFun, while working for another game company. Hannah had pitched a variety of games back then. "I remembered one of these games I loved but thought I'd never see on the shelf," DeGiulio recalls. "So I called and asked if she still had it, and she did." So they made a prototype and Hannah helped pitch the game, and the company, on dozens of radio and TV appearances including "The Jimmy Kimmel Show" and "The Ellen DeGeneres Show." Apparently, Hannah has a thing for games, telling DeGiulio, "I would rather play a board game with my friends than walk the red carpet."

And while few of us will ever walk the red carpet, we can all take time out to be with our friends, our family, and play a game. It really is simple. It really is fun. 

Alicia Manley is a Northwest writer, wife and mother of three. She jumped at the chance to write this SimplyFun article because she was able to incorporate work time and play time.