

New York family

The Seeds of Success

By ERIKA THORMAHLEN

One Of The City's Leading Children's Activity Centers—apple seeds—Takes Its Special Offerings For Kids Across The Globe, And Now Finally Uptown

The story goes something like this: Two moms cram their double-wide strollers into a freight elevator on their way to a mommy & me music class. Sizing up each other's cargo, they strike up a conversation.

"Twins?"

"Twins."

"Hi, I'm Alison."

"Hi, *I'm* Allison."

"I'm from Jersey."

"Really? *I'm* from Jersey."

For most, this might be nothing more than the cliché meet-cute of a beautiful (if potentially confusing) friendship. For Allison Schlanger and Alison Qualter Berna, it was the opening scene of an equally bright business partnership. Along with their respective husbands, Craig Schlanger and Bobby Berna, the moms would soon become Co-Founders of apple seeds, an all-in-one play space in Manhattan's Flatiron District bringing birthday parties, varied classes and even kiddie haircuts to the five-and-under set.

At the time of their chance meeting back in 2005, the two sets of parents bonded over raising twins as the entrepreneurial stars aligned: Allison had just left her career as an executive producer at MTV; Alison was struggling with how to transition from her position at UNICEF into



Fun in the indoor playground



Bobby, Alison, Allison and Craig

something that would mesh with motherhood and keep her mind active; Craig was considering his next move from Wall Street as a trader, while Bobby had already established a résumé as a business development executive working with start-ups.

Meanwhile, in the city blocks surrounding Madison Square Park where the Schlangers and the Bernas lived, changes were afoot. “Even though all these families had moved in, the neighborhood hadn’t caught up and was still very commercial and business-oriented,” explains Allison—hence the freight elevator setting during that initial introduction.

So, the foursome took matters into their own hands. And nine months after their first official business meeting—where a bottle of red wine helped get the creative juices flowing—apple seeds was born.

The buzz was immediate. The team sold memberships based solely on design sketches to parents in the nearby Madison Square Park area. “We had several hundred members before we opened on March 1, 2007,” says Alison. Her husband, Bobby, adds: “I think early on, we knew we were on to something.”

Just like the couples’ two sets of twins—Sam and Ari Schlanger, and Madeleine and Sydney Berna—now age seven, apple seeds has been growing. With licensed partnerships in Dubai, Mexico City and Mumbai, the facility’s carefully documented curriculum and design features have been packaged and implemented across the globe. Closer to home, there are now apple seeds-branded playgrounds in several residential buildings sprouting up around Manhattan—with signature NYC-themed interactive stations, like a grocer’s deli next to Central Park.

“From a business perspective, apple seeds was designed with the intent to scale it,” says Craig, when talking about the company’s impressive growth. And while the business’ popularity has been gathering steam with licensing deals, the team has notably waited to open a new space in Manhattan under their own management—until now, with their new full-service venue on the Upper West Side.

“People were asking us when we first opened, ‘When are you gonna move Uptown?’ and it always felt premature,” says Allison. Though friends and brokers were constantly pitching the team retail space leads, the team felt like they weren’t quite ready in terms of experience and timing. “[Now,] we’re confident exporting this to the Upper West Side or to Dubai,” Alison adds.

With their long-time staff and meticulously developed programming ready to go, the final puzzle piece proved difficult to fit: finding the perfect place. “You really have to find the right space at the right price and that’s hard to do. It took years,” says Craig.

What cinched the deal for the Upper West Side? “The location,” he responds succinctly. “And the ground-floor access,” Alison chimes in, speaking to the frustration of any caregiver who has arrived late to their toddler’s art class thanks to a filled-to-capacity elevator.

Located on West End Avenue between 69th and 70th Streets, smack in the heart of a neighborhood teeming with young families, the newest apple seeds feels very much like the original. That is no mistake; the team is betting on parents’ universal desire for a safe, clean, fun place to take their kids. Explains Allison, “We always say we built apple seeds to be your basement, your backyard, your own personal park.”

From its play-based curriculum to its ever-popular birthday party themes, what members know and love about the Flatiron location can now be found Uptown as well, right down to the playground's big yellow taxi. "That playground is the exact same whether you're in One Columbus Circle, here in the Flatiron or in Dubai," says Alison. Even the non-toxic cleaning products have been reordered for the new space.

The only change that comes with expansion, perhaps, is the team's renewed dedication to their classes, from art and yoga, to science and soccer. "The bigger we get, the deeper we've gone with the curriculum," declares Allison. Though an eventual apple seeds school might be a dream-come-true for some, Alison reminds preschoolhappy families: "We always knew we weren't a school and we never call ourselves a school. However, we recognize the huge responsibility when you have a child at a key learning age in your environment 45 minutes every week."

Classes emphasize confidencebuilding and play-based socialization like songs for seeds, a music program developed in-house by Ray Andersen. Known to apple seeds enthusiasts as mr. RAY, Andersen wrote all the music and lyrics for songs for seeds. Incorporating an original soundtrack performed by a live band with a game show-esque spinning wheel, the class is their standout offering— and is headed for the Upper West Side too.

While the opening of their new location may be the latest addition to the apple seeds family, it is not the only one. Befitting of their parallel beginnings, both Alison and Allison each welcomed a third child with the same synchronicity with which their friendship began. Born just two months apart, Alison's Jack and Allison's Dov are currently deep in the throes of toddlerhood. Translation: these mompreneurs are sitting in on classes not as owner-observers, but as pleased participants all over again.

"I have a new fire in my belly about apple seeds," Allison says beaming. "apple seeds is part of both of our families, it really is like another child. We work as a family here."

Erika Thormahlen writes about fashion, family and travel from NYC.

To read more about apple seeds' beginnings, check out "double The Fun" at newyorkFamily.com.