

Milton Means Business

Store making name for itself in educational toys

By STEPHANIE THIESSEN

The Champion

It started as a hunt for the perfect birthday present. Fiona Kennedy wanted something unique for her four-year-old son to give to his friend.

Unfortunately, there were no toy stores in the Milton area that offered what she had in mind.

Not one to be easily deterred, Ms Kennedy set her wheels in motion. A few months later, in May of 1996, a store opened that offered exactly what she had been looking for. It was full of educational toys with science and nature themes. It was a store for both parents and children—and it was her own.

Her store, located in downtown Milton, is called Nature's Fire. Although her dream had come true, there was still some nervousness.

"I'd never done retail in my life. With the time, effort and money (I put into it), I was hoping I was doing the right thing," Ms Kennedy said. "Starting your own business is nerve wracking."

There was no need for Ms Kennedy to worry. It was a big hit. The store is now thriving, and has thousands of customers each year.

In fact, just recently, Ms Kennedy and her husband, Ron—who joined the business four years ago—reached what could be considered the pinnacle of their success. Last month, Toys and Games Magazine, Canada's toy industry publication, selected Nature's Fire as Canada's Toy Retailer of the Year for 2002.

The award is presented annually, and is based on consultation with representatives in the toy industry. The criteria includes customer service, product knowledge and creative promotion.

Mr. Kennedy said he remembers clearly the day they received the good news. He got the call from the editor of Toys and Games Magazine and quickly called his wife to share the excitement.

"When he called me, I was shocked. It was really exciting. It was out of all the independent toy stores in Canada, so it was quite an honour," Ms Kennedy said.

The road to success came as a result of hard work and large dreams.

In 2001, just five years after the first store at 221 Main St. E. opened, a second Nature's Fire store in Vaughan opened its doors. Now, Ms Kennedy takes care of the Vaughan store, while Mr. Kennedy runs the Milton store.

"This lets us be in business together separately," Mr. Kennedy said.

Milton was the ideal location for the original store, Ms Kennedy said, particularly because the

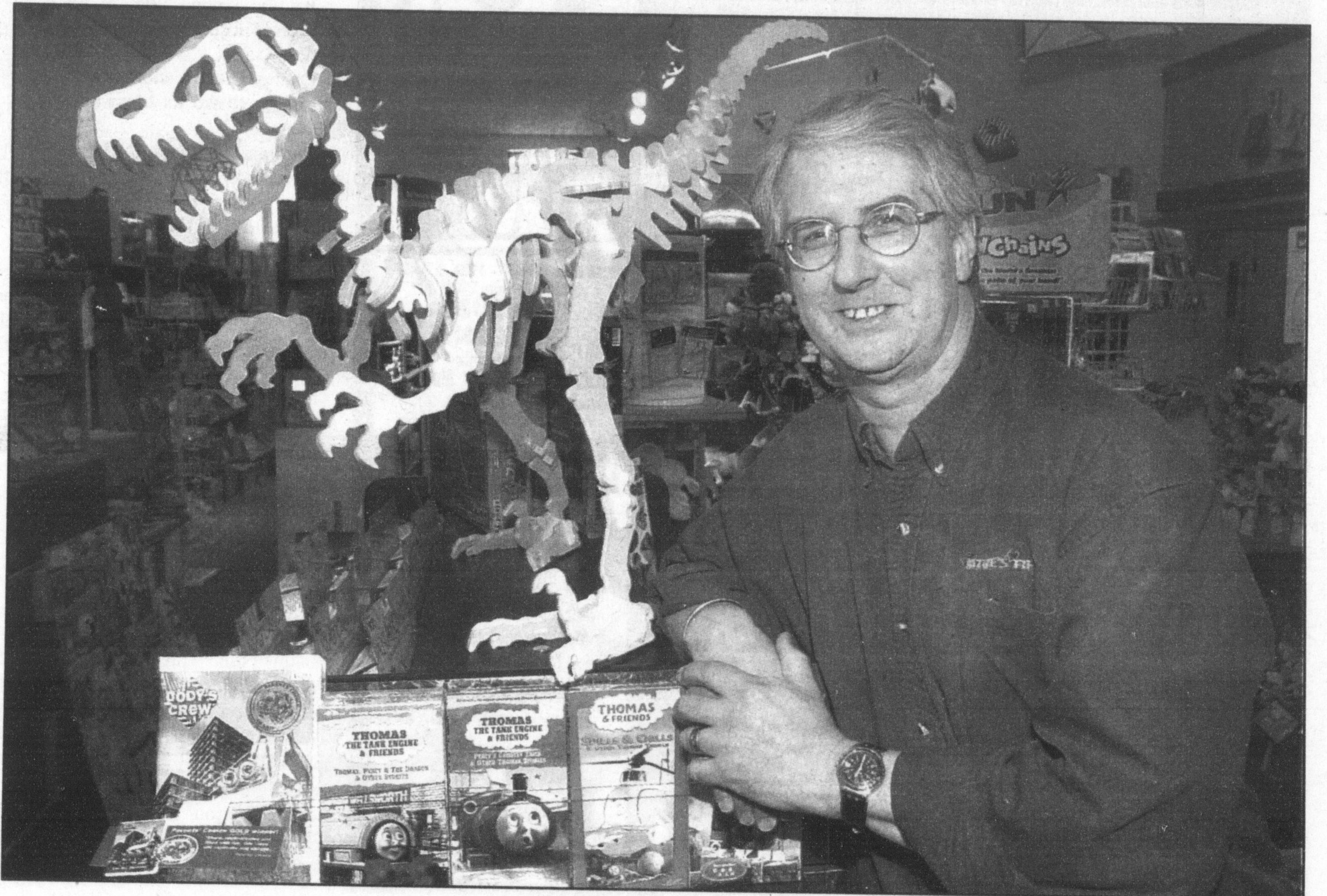


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE
Ron Kennedy of Nature's Fire stands beside T-Rex, a 3D dinosaur display at his Main Street store. The store was named the 2002 Toy Retailer of the Year by Toys & Games Magazine.

Kennedys live on the outskirts of Milton, and she had two young children she wanted to spend as much time with as possible.

Up until she opened the first store, Ms Kennedy had been a stay-at-home mom. Needless to say, the Kennedys' son, Jamie, and daughter, Lexi, were thrilled with the turn of events.

"When Fiona first opened the (Milton) store, it took Jamie and Lexi three or four months to realize it wasn't their personal playroom," Mr. Kennedy said. Now that Jamie's 12 years old and Lexi's 11, they can often be found expertly answering customers' questions, Mr. Kennedy added.

The Milton store was first located in a smaller facility right beside its current location.

"The small-town atmosphere made Milton a great (location)," Ms Kennedy said. "I'm a people person. I love having people drop in when they're passing by."

Ms Kennedy said that in the early years, one of the most difficult things about the business was finding the toys she wanted to sell. There were many quality toys in the United States, but many couldn't be brought into Canada.

"There's lots of American stuff that's now available through Canadian distributors, or it can be brought up," she said.

Customer service and product knowledge are two of Nature's Fire's trademarks, Ms Kennedy said—not to mention a strict set of criteria that each product must pass before it's sold. Something the Kennedys always keep in mind is

the play value of each toy. The store doesn't carry any action figures, Ms Kennedy said, because "kids play with them for half-an-hour and then toss them aside."

The product range has broadened somewhat since the first store opened, so not all the toys have nature and science themes. But quality educational toys are still what the Kennedys strive to offer.

Many of the toys require some building or assembling so when they're finished, children play with them for longer and are more careful with them, Ms Kennedy said.

She added that she can't imagine doing anything else. "As long as business is good, and we have good product and staff, we'll continue to do it."

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