

# A Very Personal Shopper

Behind the baby booties, blankets, and toys is a young woman who makes wishes come true for struggling parents

Julie Brown balances her five-foot frame on a stepladder and reaches past a mound of clothes to get to a stack of bassinets. Her clients, a couple from Queens, NY, and their 2-month-old son, watch as Brown sifts through the pile, finds a suitable size for the infant, and hops down.

"Is there anything else you need?" she asks, and answers her own question with a brightly colored rattle that she dangles in front of the baby.

With its floor-to-ceiling collection of picture books, primary-colored toys, and pint-size clothes, this could be a kids' store like any other. But look more closely at Room To Grow, as this small boutique in Harlem, NY, is called, and you'll notice there's not a price tag on the premises. That's because all of the new or "very gently used" items are donated by businesses (including Bloomingdale's and Ralph Lauren) and families.

A therapist and social worker, Brown, 33, is also a different kind of shopkeeper. Devoting five days per week to private appointments with low-income parents, Brown creates an intimate environment where her customers can choose top-quality items with dignity. If parents feel they can provide for their babies, says Brown, it makes them feel better about themselves.

Brown, who handled fine art for five years at Christie's auction house before earning a master's degree in social work, came up with the idea for Room To Grow while working as a child therapist at a health clinic for low-income families. She couldn't



Taking inventory: Julie Brown at her New York City boutique.

help comparing her clients' urgent needs with the abundance of baby goods many of her young friends were accumulating. A swap, she figured, was in order. Today, her clients are referred by social-service agencies and can shop every three months until their child turns 3 years old. While the parents browse, Brown—who lives in Manhattan and draws a salary from grants and donations—casually offers tips on nurturing young children.

"You'd be a good mother," says the woman from Queens at the end of her appointment, clearly pleased with Brown's low-key advice, as well as the supplies she's picked up—including bedding for the baby and, for her 4-year-old son at home, a book about being a big brother. For now, says Brown, helping other people's children provides satisfaction enough. "When I go home and think about my day," she says, "I realize there's nothing better than helping, and learning from, these families. I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing." —Annie Stoltie

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRÉ SOUJOUJON