

*specialists*

# The Man in the Moon

*An out-of-this-world shop helps patrons get in touch with their inner kid through the medium of marbles.*



BY LORING LEIFER

**K**nuckle down. Play for keeps. Lose your marbles. Almost everyone uses expressions derived from the game of marbles. Far fewer play the game.

Bruce Breslow is an exception. The 55-year-old co-owner of Moon Marble Company in Bonner Springs, Kan., is a marble maven or “mibster.” He’s also a fount of information about the lore and history of a game that can trace its origins to Roman times.

“Have you been to the Moon?” asks Breslow, who resembles a cross between Gene Shalit and Peter Max. Visitors are in for a wild ride.

The Moon Marble Company is a palace of play that has attracted visitors from all 50 states and 39 countries and inspired a documentary, “Rolling into Business,” on YouTube.

A million marbles shimmer in glass candy jars, and handmade art marbles and glasswork glitter like jewels from display cases in a gallery section. More than 100,000 kids have come through Moon

*Left: A few of Bruce Breslow’s hand-crafted marbles. Right: Breslow fashions a marble with fire and glass.*



# MARBLE Tak

The basic rules of the game are to propel your shooter marble into your opponent's target marbles or "mibs." The game has inspired a colorful language. Here are some terms and expressions:

**Copping the mibs**—Taking home the target marbles you have won.

**Knuckle down**—The rules require that you keep your knuckles on the ground when you shoot.

**Mibology**—The study of marbles.

**Moonie**—A semi-translucent, pale colored marble with a soft luster.

**Playing for fair**—The marbles go back to the owner after the game.

**Playing for keeps**—The winner keeps the marbles after the game.

**Riding a snooger**—To shoot an easy target marble out of the ring in such a way that the shooter deflects off the snooger into a more favorable position for the next shot.

**Snooger**—A near miss, for example, a shot missed by a "snooger." Also a missed opportunity.

**Sugaring the mib**—Etching the marble by rubbing it with sandpaper or on concrete to make it easier to control.

Marble on scheduled field trips, where they watch Breslow and other glass artists make marbles and learn how to play the game.

And marbles are just the start of the store's appeal. Wistful for a game you played in childhood? You'll find it here. Chinese checkers, Jacob's ladders, Wacky Wobblers, yo-yos, jumbo jacks, tic-tac-toe sets, and pick-up sticks pack the shelves. Need a gnarly nose, a magic set, or a fighting nun puppet?

"I buy the toys that make you think," says Breslow, who co-owns the business with Lynda Sproules.

## WONDER FULL

Breslow likes to figure out how to make things, and when you are full of wonder, one subject can easily lead to others. This curiosity has driven his career, which is full of loops and unexpected turns, one of which

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Breslow likes to figure out how to make things, and one subject easily leads to another.

took him into the marble business.

He had a woodworking and cabinet shop in the same location since the 1980s. About 10 years ago, his arthritis started making it difficult to work on larger projects, so he turned to making wooden games, like Wahoo and Chinese checker's. They required marbles, so he went to the local Ben Franklin, which only had two colors available. Breslow wanted more and set out to find out if anyone still made marbles.

He tracked down a factory in West Virginia. The minimum order was 12 cases. "Give me some in every color," Breslow said. A week later, a truck pulled up with 85,000 marbles—aggies, hippos, grasshoppers, zebras, cat's eyes, and tornados in sizes from ½-inch pee-wees to toebreakers almost two inches in diameter.

This soon led him to learn about marble history, competitions, and the process used to make them by hand, which is called lamp-working.

One of his resident glass artists, Brian Heikes, demonstrates. He pushes two rods of Italian glass together in a torch flame. At 1250 degrees Fahrenheit, the glass softens into a ball. When he gets the shape to approximate size, he transfers one end to a metal rod, or punty, and begins to melt on colors from other tubes of glass. Periodically, he rolls the ball in a graphite mold to make sure it is completely round. It takes about 15 to 30 minutes to make a marble.

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## Details

### MOON MARBLE COMPANY

**Address:** 600 East Front Street

Bonner Springs, KS 66012

**Phone number:** 913-441-1432

**Website:** moonmarble.com

**Store hours:** Tuesday – Friday from 10:00 to 5:00 and Saturday from 10:00 to 3:00. Open Sundays from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

**Demo hours:** Tuesday and Friday 10:30 to 4:00 and Saturday 10:30 to 2:00. Call to check schedule for other days.

**Machine made marbles:** \$3.50 to \$10.50 a pound (about 80-90 5/8-inch marbles).

**Art marbles:** \$20 up to \$1,600.

**Workshops:** Day-long marble- and bead-making workshops for \$150.

### HANDY KID

Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Breslow played marbles as a kid in an abandoned Coast Guard station. Another pastime was scavenging around the neighborhood looking for materials—bottles, boards, and metal—that could be turned into something else.

“My childhood was like the ‘Little Rascals,’” says Breslow. “Everyone knew who you were and no one cared where you were—until dinnertime.”

At the age of four, he built an airplane that he nailed to the porch. In first grade, he built a scooter. Next came birdhouses. His only tools were a hammer and a screwdriver, which he sharpened on the cobblestone street until he could use it as a chisel. He learned calligraphy and made a sign for his Aunt Sal’s maternity store. He was 7 at the time.

Eventually, his family moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut. He studied at several colleges taking art, elementary educa-

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tion, biology, bugs, and history courses.

He liked being outdoors and knew a lot about animals, so he volunteered for the Connecticut Audubon Society. On day one, he noticed a map shelter in disrepair, so he scrapped and painted it. Day two, he built a frame for the turtle tanks. On day three, the director offered him a job. He visited schools and taught children about animals and built trails and bridges.

"My father used to tell people that I was good at making anything but money," Breslow said.

### **PLAY TIME**

He's proven to be just as good at making people smile as the purveyor of play in the community.

Every year, Moon Marble hosts Marble Days, a fundraiser for Bonner Springs, held during the first weekend in May. All around town are marble races, hopscotch, paddle ball, sack races, bean-bag tosses, marble-making demos, and "Super Bruce and the Pinky Ball Run," to name a few.

The first weekend in March, Moon Marble sponsors Marble Crazy, where glass artists from all over the country come to demonstrate and show their work. Last year, 24 artists took part. The event also included free marble identification, a "Road Show" for marble collectors.

"There may be fewer marble players today, but there are more enthusiasts and collectors," Breslow says. And, just perhaps, this might bring about a resurgence in playing the game.

"Personally, I think playing marbles helps your hand-eye coordination," he says. "It also teaches you to concentrate, control movements, strategize, and most important, lose your marbles graciously." ♦