

LIVE FROM MY LIVING ROOM

Women Who Hustle, Volume 3: Alison and Allison

May 6, 2013



*(So what's this Women Who Hustle feature all about? Women Who Hustle are women who are excited about what they're doing, have ridiculous drive, are creative and achieve what they've set out to do. But the more important distinguishing factor is that these are women who not only have big ideas, plans and dreams but also execute. They are not paralyzed by fear, indecision and the unknown. This doesn't, however, mean that they don't question their abilities, talents and direction, because they do (sometimes). We all do. These women just know how to move past all that and get where they need to go. Basically, Women Who Hustle are women who get sh*t done. This series was created with the hopes of introducing you to some of them and inspire you to go after what you want in life. Read about previous WWH here: [Abby Pecoriello](#) and [Julia Silver Gordon](#) (or you can always click on the pic with Dorothy's ruby slippers over to the right for all archived WWH posts). Now let's meet the hustlers!)*



Alison Qualter Berna and Allison Schlanger.

You could call them the Allison's, but technically that would be incorrect (one spells it *Alison* and the other is *Allison*). But it's hard to not give Alison Qualter Berna and Allison Schlanger a unifying single moniker. They are the entrepreneurial duo behind the widely popular indoor play space and kid class destination [apple seeds](#), they're best friends, they each have three kids (both have a set of twins and a younger sibling) and they finish each other sentences in that synergistic way that like minds with similar sensibilities and goals tend to do.

I first met Berna and Schlanger six years ago when I was writing a story about apple seeds for *Chelsea Now*, a local downtown paper serving that area. Apple seeds had just opened on 25th street (the black and white pic above is of the first apple seeds window when they opened in March of 2007) and, until then, there was nothing like it in the area. In the article, I had written that "[f]or many, the neighborhood is synonymous with painting canvases and cocktails, not jungle gyms and juice." And for a while, it was. Sure, there was a Buy Buy Baby on 7th Avenue but the demographic had just started to really shift with more and more young families settling down in the new condos sprouting up on every corner. Berna and Schlanger couldn't have opened at a better time, and it wouldn't have happened if not for a baby music class, serious career self-reflection and some mom-to-mom venting while maneuvering double strollers in a tight elevator.

Apple Seeds brings child's play to Chelsea

BY MARSHA LEBEDEV BERNSTEIN

On a solemn stretch of Chelsea along 25th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, a pleasantly incongruous window beckons passers-by with its merriment and mirth. A plush red-and-white monekey hangs from a rope, its arms secured by a wooden clothespin. All the while, two furry friends perch below, enjoying their tea atop modern espresso-colored chairs. Pushing through the glass doors to the left of this whimsical scene brings more of the same, in the form of an expansive mural featuring lollipop-shaped trees and a Lilliputian deli where the organic produce is magically non-perishable.

To the uninitiated, Chelsea might sound like an unlikely spot to open a play space for preschoolers. For many, the neighborhood is synonymous with painting canvases and cocktails, not jungle gyms and juice. But earlier this month, Apple Seeds became the area's first all-in-one indoor play space for the 5-and-under set, signaling a shift toward family-friendliness reflective of the new demographic taking hold nearby.

On a recent Wednesday morning, the



Chelsea Now photo by Marsha Lebedev Bernstein
Apple Seeds co-Founder Allison Berna and daughter Madeleine, 2, of Chelsea at the Lego table in the playground's construction area.

and began to settle down in the neighborhood with their growing broods in one

planning to soon.
But Apple Seeds is not just a conve-

classroom.

When it came to its business beyond its Leikind, an elementary also Allison Schlanger "Ooohhh...Aaahh...li class for children apduces lotions, potior preschoolers. In their Apple Seeds, Tayo, J 4 1/2, 4 and 5, respo to make bouncing ba and borax (who knew

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My 2007 article about apple seeds in Chelsea Now.

When Berna and Schlanger met, they were both on maternity leave from their jobs at Unicef and MTV, respectively. "A lot of it was luck and timing," explained Berna. Each had an intense career in terms of travel and that created what Berna says was a "very real pull against going back." Schlanger loved her job as a TV producer but knew the demands would be very challenging now that she was a mother. They were both at that crossroads that many moms face toward the end of their maternity leave, where they ask themselves whether they will go back to doing what they did before having kids or whether something new will follow.

The two became friendly in a local baby music class – Berna with her twin girls and Schlanger with her twin boys – and initially chatted casually about this idea of an indoor play space for kids (preferably something that didn't require you to squeeze into an elevator with strollers the size of Mini Coopers and make your way to an upper floor just to have your baby shake a maraca and listen to "The Wheels on the Bus").

Craig Schlanger, Allison's husband, was also at a point in his career where he was thinking of making a clean break and doing something different. The Wall Streeter proved to be an instructive sounding board when Allison shared the idea with him and, given his financial background, had a clear sense of what would make the idea a viable business. One element he thought was crucial: having a partner.

Though they didn't know each other long, Schlanger felt Berna would be the perfect partner: they had similar goals and values, and wanted similar things for their kids and families. In fact, it actually felt right that theirs was a budding acquaintanceship at the time and not a friendship with history. "If we had been best friends at the time and everything fell apart," Schlanger pointed out, "it would be something that destroyed the business and the friendship."



So with a wine glass in hand (even hustlers sometimes need liquid courage) and nothing to lose, Schlanger called Berna to ask if she was in (in true Women Who Hustle fashion, Schlanger felt the fear but did it anyway). Upon hearing the proposal, Berna knew that it was *the* moment, that moment where you decide to take a leap of faith. So leap they did. Having those conversations about their vision, coupled with the need and desire to change their careers, and a real mom-to-mom/woman-to-woman connection allowed them to do it with confidence.

Bobby Berna, Alison's husband, was in too, although initially he continued with his full time gig as part of a start-up he had co-founded. Soon enough, he made the transition and devoted all his time to apple seeds. As such, the "Al(l)isons" are quick to point out that theirs is a business with *four* principals who give equally, as some often become wrapped up in the narrative of these two women who are doing it on their own. Both pointed out that without Craig and Bobby's support – without their business and financial savvy, and strategical thinking — they couldn't have done it (*Another Women Who Hustle characteristic: Give credit where credit is due*).

Six years later and the Bernas and Schlangers are now not only intertwined professionally but personally. The women are the best of friends, as are the kids and families as a whole. (When Berna's daughter worked on a family tree project for school, she asked her mom where she should feature the Schlanger siblings).



"The job fits into my life," says Berna, "I don't make myself fit into the job. Many people go through the motions wishing they had something else but the priority is still the job. We always said we'd make family and kids the priority." It's this flexibility and big-picture approach that allows Berna and Schlanger to schedule meetings around their kids school events and pick-up times, a luxury they are aware of and appreciate.

This doesn't, however, mean they are lounging around once the kids are bathed and tucked in for the night. They may devote afternoon hours to taking kids to after school activities and playgrounds, but then they're back to work from 8:00 to midnight. There's always more to be done.

And if it wasn't for this commitment, apple seeds could not have grown the way it has in the last six years. Last summer they opened a second owner-operated apple seeds on the Upper West Side and they also have two international franchises, one in Dubai and one in Mumbai. Their goal is to open a few more owner-operated apple seeds spaces in the New York area and they also plan to launch a domestic franchise program in the near future.

So what has surprised them along the way?

Schlanger says she is still stunned when she hears compliments about apple seeds from people who don't realize she's affiliated with the business. She's thrilled that people have received it the way they have. Business-wise, she points out that things are constantly evolving and "you're continually reinvesting in the business." Whether it's maintenance or developing something new, "it's never done."

As for Berna, she too is in awe of how apple seeds has impacted children, parents and the community in general. She loves that families and moms are meeting each other and developing friendships, whether in Chelsea or Dubai. Berna also pointed out that the dually negative and positive aspect of having your own business is that because new ideas are on the table every day, you really can't turn it off ever. It's a seven-day-a-week biz.

What helps you hustle?

Berna:

1. Yoga or some form of exercise ("keeps me grounded; helps me hustle faster.")
2. Ambition (for happiness, not money; "maybe Jewish Italian neuroses too.")
3. "If something doesn't happen quickly, it won't happen."

Schlanger:

1. Alison, Craig and Bobby ("I've never met people who move so fast in such a thoughtful, careful and efficient way.")
2. My kids ("I want to get things done so I can be with them and be present.")
3. Exercise.

Ultimately, these two (although technically four) hustlers don't let good ideas die. They make decisions, move forward and never rediscuss things. Sure, they may change directions or tweak things, but they don't wait too long. The longer you wait, they told me, the less likely it will happen.

Glad they they didn't wait too long to share their vision.