

Paulina Springs marks 25 years of bookselling in Sisters

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

The venerable trade of bookselling has been buffeted by stiff and swirling commercial winds over the past 25 years — from the rise and fall of giant brick-and-mortar stores to the massive inroads of the online leviathan Amazon.com.

Paulina Springs Books has weathered them all.

Founded in 1992 by Dick Sandvik and Diane Campbell, the store established itself as a cultural center in Sisters, offering an eclectic selection of hand-picked books, hosting author events and even serving as the launching pad for the Sisters Folk Festival. Brad Smith took ownership 15 years ago and has carried on the bookstore's legacy while pushing it into new territory.

Smith saluted his predecessors for building a strong base in a tough trade.

"It's a hard thing to do," he said. "They did a powerful job."

Smith says that he tries to stay on the cutting edge of a technology-driven field, with a full-functioning website that allows for direct purchase and downloadable audio books and the like. But his real focus is on something that might be considered old-fashioned:

"Just focusing on our core message, which for me is customer service. Nothing overshadows customer service. It is by far and away the thing that makes a successful retail business, in my opinion. It's all about creating customer satisfaction, creating an experience that people want to

return to — and that experience has a lot to do with the people who work here."

One of those people is Sue Tank, who started right at the beginning, with Campbell and Sandvik. Tank is a reader, especially of crime and mystery fiction and natural history. She has as much passion for reading and for books as any of her customers, and that passion shows as she walks around the store helping a customer find just the right book for a Father's Day present.

That's just not something an algorithm can produce.

"Amazon is obviously a very successful company," Smith said. "Their customer service is not the same as ours."

That customer service includes the ability to order pretty much any book and get it into the store in a couple of days.

Independent book stores have long discovered that books alone are not sufficient to support an operation, and Paulina Springs is no exception.

"We've certainly

diversified," Tank said.

In Paulina Springs case, that means carrying lines of toys and games that seem to fit pretty seamlessly into the atmosphere of the store.

Smith acknowledges that the large footprint of the store and the extensive inventory are not strictly necessary.

"It's a weakness of mine," he said. "I'm always saying, 'Oh, wouldn't this be cool...'"

But the cool factor is part of the charm of Paulina Springs. Whether it was years of serving as a musical hub of the community, or a gathering place for authors and readers, the bookstore has been much more than simply a retail business — it is a cultural linchpin and destination for locals and visitors alike.

There are many prognosticators of gloom and doom for the publishing industry. Smith isn't one of them.

"People tend to think that the youth aren't going to read because they're so digitally set, they do everything on screens," he said.

Yet, he says, young people are more and more drawn



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Brad Smith has owned Paulina Springs Books for 15 years, building on a business established by Dick Sandvik and Diane Campbell in 1992.

to books. The Young Adult (YA) market is the strongest sector of the book publishing industry, and it's drawing top-drawer talent. Many top-selling non-fiction titles are now accompanied by YA versions, and some fine writers are working in the YA field.

"The quality of writing there is so much better than it used to be," Smith said.

"It's always been a minority who I would define as readers — people who read for pleasure," he said. "I don't think it's changed. If it's changed, it's grown."

Smith spent his early career in the grocery business, and in both that field and in book-selling, he is a passionate proponent of shopping local. Spending your money with a mom-and-pop operation directly benefits your community and municipality, creating jobs, building a tax base and creating vibrancy. He's proud to have been a part of creating what many

consider to be a vital asset to the Sisters community.

And he sees hopeful signs that more and more people are finding benefits to shopping locally — though he acknowledges that he may be unduly optimistic.

"Do I see that happening? Yeah, I see it. But I see it because I hope it," he said. "My hopes drive me as opposed to my realities."

But hope and a dream is what drives most folks who open a business in Sisters — hope that they can make a living doing something they love while contributing to their community. And Smith — along with his predecessors Campbell and Sandvik — can have no doubt that they have done that.

"I can really say that I've contributed to a community, being an asset," Smith said. "Those are the things that make it all worthwhile."

Paulina Springs Books is located at 252 W. Hood Ave.



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Sue Tank (right) offers Carol Dixon some of the customer service that made Paulina Springs' reputation.



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