

A new look and a new life for A Woman's Place Bookstore

by P. M. Scott

Part I

The little corner hole-in-the-wall, dark and womblike, where you could sneak in your dog and read for hours without interruption (even by other customers) is gone. For some, the old bookstore at 24th & Ankeny was comfortable as well-worn sneakers; for others, it was someone else's old shoes — well past its prime, a little dank, relevant to a sentimental few. Today A Woman's Place Bookstore, recently moved to N.E. Broadway, has a new look and new life.

In 1980 the bookstore, then on S.W. Washington, lost its lease. With barely a week to relocate, it took over the scant 500 square feet of space at 24th & Ankeny, in the heart of what is lovingly and disparagingly called "the lesbian ghetto." It did not thrive. Almost immediately it began losing revenue. It did continue to exist for five years, however, in the hand-to-mouth, below-poverty line manner familiar to so many women.

On Ankeny, the bookstore was neither easily accessible nor highly visible to a diversity of people. And for some of those close to it, even as something well-worn and familiar, it could be overlooked, ignored: it had been around for so long, it would always be there.

A fact of subsistence living, however, is that small difficulties can spell crisis, small crises can spell disaster.

To accommodate the community, if someone needed a book it was ordered — and only bookstore staff knew that a minimum order from a business or publisher was often 25 items. Stock on hand outgrew the space. One of everything was crammed onto shelves, into display cases. Duplicates were kept boxed. There was a wonderful assortment of things available and, like a thrift table, if you were willing to dig, grope and uncover, treasures abounded. But few came to dig for treasure and the inventory grew. The clientele did not.

Rent was cheap, \$185 per month including utilities. But the landlord "forgot" to pay the electricity. One day power to the entire building was cut off and the bookstore had to close. Eventually it even paid the landlord's past-due bills. Lights were turned off again, and again the landlord could not be reached. Neither phone calls nor certified letters were answered. And the walls leaked and shelves began to crumble.

Books piled up. Bills piled up. \$10,000 in debt, the bookstore was six months behind paying its bills — to the small presses and woman-owned businesses who dealt with them. Book orders began to be returned unfilled: "Pay up or not another book — ever." Something wasn't working anymore. Something was horribly wrong.

As usual, a few people were doing most of the work, taking responsibility, making decisions — holding the bookstore together as something visible, valuable to the community. But eventually they asked for help: board members to share the decision making, with a year's commitment and four hours of work a week for the store. For six months help was sought via bookstore bulletin board and Rag Times. And the bookstore was dying. A Woman's Place continued to be a comfortable pair of sneakers tucked away in a corner and referred to for comfort and security.

Businesses, collectives, dreams die every

day, and woman-owned businesses are especially vulnerable. The bookstore was no exception. The board members tore into the accounting system, researching the numbers, interpreting the patterns. Something had to be done — and quickly. \$10,000 in debt (and rapidly increasing), the bookstore had a building falling down around it, a "slum landlord," and creditors at the heels or dying, too.

Two solutions were considered, one of them bankruptcy, but board members opted for saving the bookstore and its inventory. Staying where it was, however, the bookstore was doomed to death — possibly within two months. Moving was a calculated risk not to be addressed lightly. With deposits, first and last months' rent, moving and setting-up expenses, it was estimated a move could cost another \$7,000 — on top of the debt already accumulated.

Then the 2200 square foot space next to Dugan's on 15th and N.E. Broadway came up for rent again. The landlord was approachable, neighbors welcoming, foot traffic — near a restaurant, theater, shopping mall — was excellent. The building was wheelchair accessible and fairly easy to reach by women and minorities.

The rent was high. But inquiries showed that the same inadequate 500 square feet of the old place would cost \$400 anywhere else. Negotiations got the rent down to \$700 to begin with (it will reach \$1400 at the end of the first year), and promises assuaged creditors for another three months.

The time came, the decision was made, the chance taken. And after years of rumor, months of discussion, all the planning and preparation was carried out in about six weeks and within a one week period the bookstore closed and reopened.

Now located at 1431 N.E. Broadway, A Woman's Place Bookstore is open 11-7 Mon-Sat., 12-5 Sunday. The area is fed by a multitude of bus lines (particularly from downtown) and attracts a greater diversity of customers. Special features at the store include the lending library, a women's-only space, a children's corner, movable bookshelves, and accessibility for the wheelchair-bound. The space is large, light, airy. A little more time will also make it "homey." Board members and staff have put in a great deal of time and energy to make this a positive space for women; they're excited about it. Customers seem happy about it too: sales have tripled since the move.

As with anything new, this Bookstore may take getting used to by some. It's clean and bright, upbeat; it's even been described as "classy." The shell is different, but the people are still friendly, helpful, and dedicated to maintaining the ultimate purposes of the women's bookstore — providing for the community of women.

Part II

The move by A Woman's Place Bookstore raised a multitude of issues and underscored the diversity of our community. Above all, it is apparent that certain concerns remain, and motivations continue to be scrupulously inspected through the prism of those concerns. Since these include ageism, sexism, racism, classism, one can find little fault with this continuing scrutiny. Dealing over and over with these same issues can be extremely frustrating for and demeaning to those under fire, however. We are a diverse community fighting many battles, often with differing and apparently conflicting techniques; yet more often than not, we fight the same war.

A Woman's Place Bookstore has as its core a statement of purpose which seems important to insert here in abbreviated form. The bookstore does have an obligation to the community and must ultimately be judged by how it adheres to these principles.

Statement of Purpose

A Woman's Place Bookstore exists to



make the community aware and to support the struggles of women to determine their own destinies. The bookstore works toward this by:

Making literature and other information of interest to the community available;

Providing a positive atmosphere where women can meet and learn from each other;

Providing information and referrals;

Reaching out to women not familiar with the store or community organizations via book tables, and being involved in sponsorship of community events;

Helping communicate about activities of interest in non-sexist and non-racist ways;

Providing an opportunity for women to work in the women's movement by volunteering at the bookstore;

Providing jobs for women;

Providing a means for women to make their work available to the community;

Supporting other women's and people's groups;

Producing programs and making space available for educational and cultural groups and programs.

The bookstore has a responsibility to the community. In turn, the community has an obligation to it. Volunteers are always needed to help staff: commit to working twice a month for three months and receive a 20% discount. For those who can afford it, become a sponsoring member: shell out 50 big ones and get a 20% discount for a year, or for \$25 get a 10% discount. Or simply resolve to buy your books or whatever you can at the bookstore.

In addition, there are 9 positions on the Board of Directors for the bookstore; only 7 of them are filled. The time commitment involved, the spiritual and emotional commitment (as evidenced by the recent move and resulting mayhem), can be awesome. All bookstore board members are volunteers; none are paid. Still, if "working actively within the women's community and the store to educate ourselves about the issues of race, class, age, ethnic background, nationality, life-style, politics and sexual preference, doing this through evaluation of our attitudes and actions at each Board meeting and through special discussions for Board members and volunteers" sounds attractive, volunteer. As usual, the call is: Become involved!

The responsibility of the bookstore to the community and vice versa was at issue recently. That it was so difficult to find people to help make decisions and take responsibility was an issue. People didn't respond to the calls for help, didn't attend community meetings. Communication and apathy are, now and seemingly forever, issues in our community. Armchair critics have limited value.

Women working is an issue. It was decided that new bookshelves should be made by

women. The six week deadline scared off many; the issue of responsibility/liability scared some; others simply didn't show up as agreed. Eventually the bookshelves were built by a male-owned company in six days. Intuitive, fluid, spiritual, anticapitalist; flaky and irresponsible. These are all words applicable to our community, and they are at issue.

Money is an issue. In order to purchase woman-labor there must be money. Money is the cause of much injustice and imbalance. Yet women deserve to make an honest living. Must employers be only male? As one board member said, "The patriarchy takes better care of women than we [women] do." Women able to hire women seems to become a negative concept. Still, one must eat, one must have clothing, a few comforts; must it always be male-owned establishments that give us money and get our money. Will being a woman of business always mean being a politically incorrect capitalist sell-out? Or can we be women in business, responsible and ethical at the same time? Perhaps that is the greater challenge.

Part III

The article about the bookstore, its directors, motivations, was written by a member of the community. Information was gathered basically from the bookstore manager and its board of directors. To remedy that not unbiased picture somewhat, an independent questionnaire was drawn up and distributed at the bookstore on a weekday/night for about a 24-hour period.

Out of 52 questionnaires: 45 subjects were female, 5 male, 2 no answer (n.a.). 44 white, 2 Asian, 3 Black, 1 Native American, 1 "Ukrainian," 1 other. 34 were lesbian or gay, 11 heterosexuals, 3 bisexual, 4 n.a., 29 liberals, 7 moderates, 13 radicals, 2 conservatives, 1 with no political leaning. 3 were age 15-20; 21 were 21-30; 20 were 31-40; 5 were 41-50; 3 were 51-60. 8 made \$0-3,000; 14 made \$3,000-\$10,000; 6 made \$10,000-15,000; 14 made \$15,000-20,000, 8 made \$25,000+; 2 n.a. 20 were from the N.E. area, 6 from S.E.; 6 from N.W., 4 from S.W.; 2 from the North; 13 out of town; 1 n.a.

Of the 35 who had been to the old store, 12 had been there hardly at all, 14 sometimes, 9 frequently. Of the 17 who had never been to the old store, 5 had now been to the new place more than once. 7 of the 13 from out of town came in specifically to the bookstore. 43 came by car/cycle, 5 on foot, 4 via bus. 32 (including 3 staff) were in the area specifically for the bookstore. Out of 51 answers regarding how well customers like the bookstore all answered "a great deal" except 2 (who said pretty much or okay). And all liked the atmosphere, finding it "warm," "Friendly." Two found it also sterile.

All comments were positive though some had suggestions for improvement (more stock, greater diversity, wall and ceiling hangings). "The bookstore is what the community needs to give it a shot of pride." "Did a great job and Portland really deserves this beautiful women's space." "Wish you had a location in South Bend." "Never liked the other space. Thanks for moving and supporting the women's community." "Pleasant, friendly, inviting." "Better to spend money here than at the Gap. Overall effect great!" "Didn't know there were so many books and records by lesbians about lesbians." "Very friendly. Women are professional and cute."

One thing that appears sure is that the new store attracts more customers and a greater diversity of customers. One concern may be that getting there from the old location may be more difficult. Its clientele seems still primarily white, female, lesbian. The results seem overwhelmingly positive, however.