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A Woman's Place plans to close doors

Staff cites rising debt, shrinking support

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

After 17 years as Portland's only feminist book retailer, A Woman's Place Bookstore will close its doors June 9. Store managers and board members plan to file for bankruptcy shortly afterward.

Diana Cohen, one of four current managers, said a combination of the store's nearly \$30,000 debt, a history of erratic bookkeeping and a loss of confidence and interest from the community all contributed to the decision to close.

But the catalyst was the recent decision of Naiad Press, the publisher of dozens of lesbian novels, to stop sending books to the store.

"We can't really get any of the books that we want," Cohen said. "We could get enough books to have a bookstore, but not to have the quality feminist bookstore people want."

As the bookstore's inventory thinned over the past two years, so did interest and involvement. Only six people now serve on the 13-position board of directors. Staff members have struggled to recruit volunteers for shifts behind the cash register. And customers took their reading habits elsewhere.

"I have felt betrayed from time to time — that people don't say, 'This is group-run, and I'll shop here first.' They go to Powell's because they have more books," Cohen said. "It's the Fred Meyer mentality — one-stop shopping."

In some ways, the store's history mirrors that of the women's movement, from the vigorous flush of the early 1970s to a mainstreaming of feminist values in a marketplace that demands sound business sense as well as high ideals.

The store was launched in 1973 by a collective of women who held bake sales and beer bashes to finance its opening. They paid salaries with CETA money from the federal government and used volunteers to do the rest of the work.

When Sarah Koehl joined the collective in 1982, the store had just moved to a tiny building on South East Ankeny Street.

By that time, "CETA funding was non-existent," she remembered. "There was no paid manager. Everyone was really burned out. It was a really sad-looking place." Within a year, the collective dropped from eight members to three, and the remaining women decided to change their recruiting tactics. They advertised for women interested in learning to run a small business, and in 1984, switched from a collective structure to a board of directors.

"That restructuring has gone on to this

day," said Koehl, who was the store's manager from 1984 until last January. "It was trying to find ways to make the bookstore viable and still remain constant to feminist ideals."

In 1985 the store moved to its current location at 1431 NE Broadway. For a while, business picked up, and Koehl believed that A Woman's Place might finally be able to climb out of debt.

In the meantime, feminist literature had begun to enter the mainstream. "Suddenly our sales dropped. The book market started realizing feminist books were a viable trade. Every bookstore in town had a women's studies section. We weren't unique anymore," Koehl said.

Beginning in 1987, Koehl recalled, she had a hard time recruiting volunteers. Gentrification came to Northeast Broadway, and the rent scooted up. The debt increased. Several publishers stopped sending books. Customers browsed the thinning racks and went away discouraged.

Kathleen Ellis, current board president, said that years of erratic bookkeeping left new staff and board members frustrated. "Records weren't maintained in an organized fashion. Because of the turnover in staff, information wasn't passed on from one person to the next."

And each new set of women involved with the store debated the conflict between ideals and red ink. Should the store devote space to a lending library and bulletin boards, areas that served the community but did not contribute to profit? Should the store provide referrals for women, or was that the job of another organization?

"It's been one of the major ideological problems," said Cohen. "We wanted to provide all these services, and we wanted to be a business."

The store is currently selling out its stock; customers are invited to visit for refreshments and final sales on closing day, Saturday, June 9.

Current and former staff members said they believed Portland could support a feminist bookstore, if it was launched with tighter bookkeeping, efforts to reach a wider market and a more consistent sense of purpose.

"I've been going over it in my head, thinking: What's the lesson to be learned?," said Koehl. "And I don't know that there is one. It was important that the bookstore was there. I know it changed women's lives — not just volunteers, but customers. We kept it alive for 17 years. We did an amazing thing."

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