

LEVELING THE FIELD

In Other Words feminist bookstore has rid itself of a major obstacle to accessibility by Inga Sorensen

There is a comic crafted by local cartoonist John Callahan that is taped to a wall at In Other Words, a cozy feminist bookstore ensconced on bustling Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard in Portland.

The cartoon, which is situated in the store's humor section, depicts a big woman, poised with hands on hips, towering over a meek-looking fellow.

"This is a feminist bookstore," she booms. "There is no humor section."

The comic has been displayed in that spot since In Other Words opened its doors five years ago come October.

It wasn't until six weeks ago, however, that Diana Courvant had the opportunity to glance at it, up close and personal.

"I got to see that and cruise through a section of books I wasn't able to before. I felt wonder," says Courvant, 29, a feminist and trans activist who struggles with a degenerative disability that forces her at times to rely on the aid of a cane, crutches or wheelchair.

Though Courvant fully supported the idea of a feminist bookstore—indeed celebrated its arrival by helping out as a volunteer when the establishment was preparing to open—she hasn't frequented the place much over the years.

At issue was a platform that had been installed as part of In Other Words' original construction. The elevated platform led to several sections, including humor, queer issues and feminist thought.

The only way to get to that area was by walking up some stairs, which made it difficult, if not impossible, for people with mobility limitations to visit those sections. As a result, some potential patrons began boycotting the store, despite the fact that they philosophically and emotionally backed the concept of a feminist bookstore.

"Many women were conflicted," explains Courvant, who was among them. "We wanted to see the store survive, but we also were concerned about the issue of accessibility."

Now they can have both. In early March, a group of In Other Words volunteers, and even a few patrons, embarked upon a full dismantling of the restrictive and controversial platform, as well as the reassembly of the affected area. What was once inaccessible has now become accessible.

"We're thrilled that the platform has finally been done away with," says Catherine Sameh, the store's manager.

According to Sameh, who has been with In Other Words from day one, the idea for the plat-

form grew from the desire to maximize limited wall space and create an aesthetically pleasing environment.

"We knew initially it might be problematic, but we didn't realize it would become such a big obstacle," she says, conceding that was a misjudgment steeped in oversight and naiveté.

Sameh says the store's founders had originally thought they could simply provide a list of titles of the books available in the platform area. A patron was to request a title, and a staff mem-

ber was to retrieve the book for the patron's viewing.

She says board members, along with a group of Lesbian Avengers who were selling some of their merchandise at the store, gathered a couple of years ago to strategize about ways to make the store fully accessible.

Sameh says at that juncture, the board had ruled out dismantling the platform, because they thought it would cost in excess of \$10,000—money the fledging enterprise simply didn't have. The other option was installing a lift at an estimated cost of \$5,000 to \$6,000. No small

"The issue of accessibility came up all the time," she says. The group eventually switched its meeting locale to a more accessible site at Portland State University.

Frances and others, meanwhile, didn't shy away from the issue, and shared their concerns with the store's board and staff. They also made themselves available to assist with any possible solution to the problem.

Enter store volunteer Laura Stride, a young woman who knows how to swing a hammer and tell the difference between a screw and a nail.

"I said, 'Why don't we just tear down the platform?'" says Stride, who is enveloped in her own home renovation project.

But what about the money?

Stride, who was willing to do the job for free, got on the line to the Avengers (and other potential helpers) and shored up their volunteer muscle support.

Then, led by her know-how, the enthusiastic group got down and dirty deconstructing the platform during an early-March weekend.

Carpet was yanked, floor sections were cut out, something was done with scaffolding.

Bypassing the technicalities, the fact is, the place is accessible thanks to the elbow grease and commitment of some caring individuals.

"It was fun working with our hands and getting dirty like that," says Frances.

During the deconstruction, Courvant dropped in with a big batch of organic cider.

"I knew they would be thirsty," she says.

Another person popped in with pizza.

"In Other Words is a wonderful and important part of the community," says Frances, "and now it can be wonderful for even more people."

■ IN OTHER WORDS WOMEN'S BOOKS AND RESOURCES is located at 3734 SE Hawthorne Blvd. in Portland. For more information, call 232-6003.



A post-renovation view of In Other Words

ber was to retrieve the book for the patron's viewing.

Strictly from a practical standpoint, the system was weak at best, given that the book selling business demands a certain browseability.

For the consumer, browsing is a critical component of any bookshop stop. To be locked out of that process can be frustrating, while having someone retrieve your goods for you can be disempowering.

Sameh says she started hearing complaints about the platform shortly after In Other Words opened. "We told people, 'Yes we know it's a problem,'" she says.

Doing something about it, however, would take much longer.

potatoes, but still significantly less than 10 grand.

There are various takes on what actually occurred with the In Other Words/Avengers committee established to tackle the problem. Break it down to its simplest form, however, and what essentially happened is the collaboration dissipated and the unsatisfactory status quo remained intact.

Until a few weeks ago, that is.

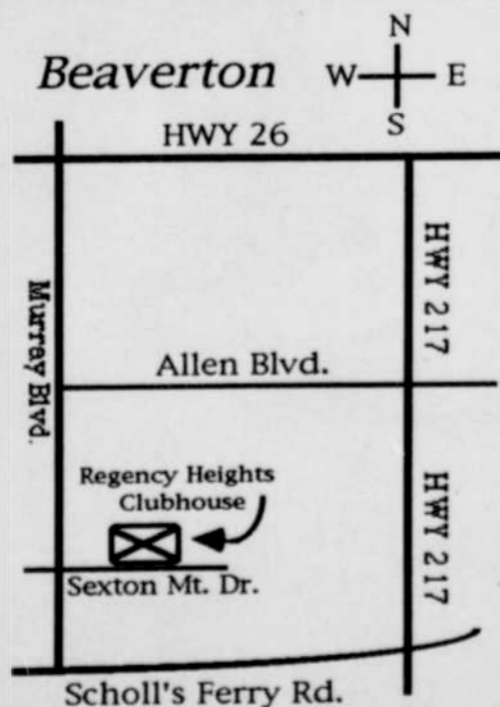
Susan Frances is part of the new crew of Portland Lesbian Avengers. She's also an In Other Words volunteer who is concerned about an array of issues, including accessibility.

She says the Avengers held their weekly meetings at In Other Words from the fall of 1997 to February of this year.

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