

**M**other Kali's Books in Eugene turns 25 this month. This is no small task considering the growing domination of national chains, which have caused independent stores to close at alarming rates.

Sounds like a good excuse for a party. And what a celebration it will be—with books, theater, art shows, a dance and a double concert featuring Irene Farrera and Holly Near.

It hasn't always been easy, but with determination and a lot of support, Mother Kali's has survived.

The store opened in 1975 during the women's movement. Women presses just were starting up, providing an outlet for feminist writers. But still, the emerging literature needed a place where readers could find it.

"We wanted a place where women's culture and lesbian-feminist reality could have a space on a street," explains Ellen Greenlaw, one of the bookstore's founders. "We needed a place where people could come in and find out about social change."

Greenlaw, Marilyn Picariello and Kathryn Hunt found such a place in a small house they rented on West 11th. Within a year, the owner sold the property, and Mother Kali's had to move. But their time on West 11th gave them a good foundation.

"We opened with the idea that the entire world is women's concern," Greenlaw says. "If it would make women's life better, we would carry it."

Mother Kali's became more than a bookstore as it grew into a community gathering place, cultural center and referral source for a variety of needs. Through the years, it changed locations several times—getting a bit more upscale and closer to the University of Oregon campus with each move.

The second location on Blair Boulevard was one of the most eventful, to say the least. Lorraine Ironplow, Mother Kali's board president, explains that they liked the multicultural neighborhood but that they were in a terrible building, which they shared "with a guy and his garage who hated us."

"The gas heater leaked," she remembers. "You could see light through the walls, and the toilet...well, you had to go outside and around the back to reach the toilet."

"I still remember what he wrote on the toilet since we had to share it," she adds with a laugh, "because I read it—like—2,000 times! It was so unpleasant."

Then there were the frequent fire inspections. "Six men in big boots would stomp around the store and write us up for some minor violation," Ironplow says. "When the lease was up, it was a pretty easy decision to move."

## A NEW CHAPTER

**Mother Kali's Books copes with change as it celebrates 25 years of independence** by Pat Young



Tova Stabin (left) and Lorraine Ironplow are struggling to survive amid the wave of national bookstore chains

Mother Kali's moved to Lawrence Boulevard and then Franklin Boulevard before landing at its current location on East 13th.

With every move, customers such as Linda Frederick followed. When she discovered Mother Kali's at its first location, she was deep in the closet.

"I happened upon Mother Kali's as a feminist, and it felt fairly safe—except, of course, there was a lesbian section, which I would sort of sidle up to and look at out of the corner of my eye," Frederick says. "It was the first time that I had been in a place that was not mainstream and really was almost a hidden place that I could go. Finally after about six trips, I got up the nerve to buy a book that dealt with lesbianism."

"It's been a transition for me. Now, I am totally out, and they are near campus and a very acceptable store."

"There is nothing about it that feels as if people are hidden. It is all open. It kind of mirrors my journey to some extent."

Despite the moves, one thing has been constant: Mother Kali's has remained a not-for-profit organization. At first, it operated as a collective, where the founders and volunteers shared in the decision-making process.

The women had part-time paying jobs, so they also could volunteer at Mother Kali's. Things were going well until the recession hit during the early 1980s.

"Most of the women had to get full-time jobs to support themselves," Ironplow says. "Then they didn't have the ability to come in and work in the store."

Mother Kali's began to struggle with frequent turnover in the volunteer help. It was in danger of losing its infrastructure.

However, the recession had a silver lining: Izzie Harbaugh, who had been helping in the store for a few years, lost her job at the university. She then decided to make Mother Kali's her focal point.

"It wasn't like a change on one day to go from a collective to a manager," Ironplow recalls. "It was a kind of gradual shift because of the economic situation."

As manager, Harbaugh strengthened the bookstore as a community center, political forum and resource center. She was a warm, welcoming spirit who easily could talk to anyone.

At the same time, she had a fiery determination to take on tough issues such as breast cancer, free speech and homeless youth. Some reg-

ular customers even thought of her as Mother Kali, the fearless goddess of India.

"The political action of the store has been largely in the selection of stock and the personal networking that Izzie did," Ironplow notes. "Izzie knew everybody in town, and they would come in just to talk to her. And now we are trying to continue."

The 71-year-old's unexpected death in January 1999 left a void that hasn't been easy to fill. The store shifted to a structure with two co-managers, three board members and three staff members.

And co-manager Tova Stabin cites other challenges: who to target, what books to carry, determining what young people want, how to keep Harbaugh's networks alive.

"People are still grieving, and because they are grieving, change is difficult," she says. "Some people have said they haven't been in here for six months because they couldn't handle coming in with Izzie not being here."

A tough challenge that has caused some change at Mother Kali's is finding a way to survive amid the wave of national bookstore chains.

"Forty percent of general independent bookstores have closed over the past six years," Ironplow notes. "In the last two years, 35 percent of feminist bookstores have closed."

The co-managers and board decided to sell more university textbooks to raise money. To do that, they needed a space, so they dismantled the lending library set up in the back of the store.

"The lending library had places to sit and a few couches. Izzie died on one of them," says Ironplow, who was Harbaugh's partner. "I took that library apart with my hands, and it was really hard to do, but I knew we needed to do that."

Stabin adds: "Change is really hard, and to do it on a community basis can be difficult. But people have been incredibly supportive."

They hope the support continues. The anniversary celebration's goal is to increase awareness of Mother Kali's and other independent bookstores as well as to say thanks for 25 years of support. **JK**

The Mother Kali's Books 25TH GALA BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION AND FUND-RAISER runs noon-midnight Nov. 11 at Agate Hall on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene. For tickets and information call 541-343-4864 or visit the Internet site [www.motherkalis.com](http://www.motherkalis.com).

PAT YOUNG, a Portland-based free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian, is writing a book about 1992's Ballot Measure 9.



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