



PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

Turning another page

Michael Powell reflects on creating the legendary book store and keeping it strong for the next generation

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This past July, Michael Powell, the architect behind the icon Powell's City of Books, handed over the company to his daughter Emily, now the third generation to run the family-owned business after Michael and his father Walter. Yet every Portlander feels a little bit of a birthright to Powell's. It is the largest independent bookstore in the nation, and yet it still feels like our collective personal library, a giant cubbyhole where we go to get lost for an hour or a day — and happily emerge 20 pounds heavier.

This is what Michael Powell created, turning a store into a destination. Thirty years after Powell bought the company from his father, Powell's flagship store at the corner of 10th Avenue and Burnside stands defiantly between the old and the new, between the city's historic core and the revitalized Warehouse and Pearl districts; between the physical and the virtual.

The halcyon days of brick and mortar bookstores would appear to have passed. On the other edge of Portland, the downtown Border's store has closed shop. The nation's second-largest physical bookstore chain is on the brink of bankruptcy as it tries to refinance and to drum up cash. A decade ago, Borders' owners made a miscalculation in unloading its online sales to a little company called Amazon.com, now the largest seller of books in the United States.

Powell's has taken a few nicks from the market changes, recently closing its technical bookstore. Street Roots sat down with Michael earlier this month to talk about how Powell's has thrived and how it's going to survive. We begin by talking about the plan to turn a family business into the largest independent bookstore in the nation.

Michael Powell: I think we had a commitment to a couple things. One was to afford readers the broadest possible perspective of reading, so that meant having a lot of different books on the shelves and that necessitated a lot of space, so letting it grow, but growing at a pace our customer base grew, so there was an organic process. The store started out here in Portland at about 3,000 to 4,000 square feet and grew in chunks, from 10,000 to 20,000 and to its current level. At no point in that process did we say we were going to be a certain size or a certain volume or anything. We were just seeing that our customers were indicating that they could stand it to be bigger and so we made it bigger. The bigger wasn't about just bigger, it was about giving good books and opportunity, and that meant time on the shelf to find a readership. And then having staff commensurate with that, and creating a healthy environment.

We didn't sit down and do a strategic plan to take us out 10 or 20 years. It was an organic process. It was a commitment to creating as broad an audience for books and as broad an book audience for readers as we possibly could.

J.Z.: And you started bringing in speakers.

M.P.: That was organic, too. It was that the only speakers we could get were self-published or oddball writers that were writing marginal books. It was a very New York Coast thing. And I literally went to a tradeshow once with a very polished brochure that showed that Portland was an airport between San Francisco and Seattle and you could send your speakers to Portland on their way between the two. So slowly over time we developed a reputation. And now we get a nice selection.

J.Z.: In July you handed the company over to your daughter, Emily.

M.P.: She earned it. She earned the right to take it on. She is the president, my wife and I are the owners.

J.Z.: You're going to stay involved?

M.P.: To coach her and to be available to do small projects and keep handling books in some manner, but not as president of the company.

J.Z.: What did she learn from you?

M.P.: I have no idea, you'll have to ask her that. Probably damn little.

I'm always surprised when she talks about her experience. When she's out speaking publicly she'll talk about books being influential to her in her formative years. She also has a passion for the business, but these are times that are particularly challenging in the book world, and she also has the knowledge and intuitive use of the technology. You can view any of the other social networking ideas as a way to promote reading — or as a challenge to reading. And so I think she can position the company to be in that role.

J.Z.: You bought the business from your dad in 1981. Was there even a kernel of thought about where the media was going to go at that time?

M.P.: No. The first time we took cognizance of how the media was evolving was when we decided to put some of our

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