

Crazy? The Man Bought a Bookstore

Tom Lyons is the new owner of a Massachusetts institution: the New England Mobile Book Fair

FOR MORE THAN a year, Tom Lyons has been planning with the precision of a field general: hiring a consultant and holding weekly meetings. The issue? How to move and recategorize more than a million books. Lyons describes the now nearly completed project as “organized chaos.”

In November 2011, the former insurance executive bought New England Mobile Book Fair (NEMBF), the largest independent bookstore in New England. From the parking lot, the squat cinder-block building nestled in a commercial strip in Newton Highlands, Mass., looks unremarkable. But step inside to a bibliophile's dream. Its 32,000 square feet (more warehouse than shop around the corner) is piled floor to ceiling with books: classics, best sellers, remainders, and picture books.

NEMBF, which is neither mobile nor a fair, is so named because the first lot of books was bought from a woman who sold the volumes out of her car at school book fairs. With the books came the name, and it stuck. More than half a century later, the store still offers discounts to schools and libraries, and the less-than-accurate name has long been just one of the store's endearing peculiarities. Until recently, all of the books (yes, one million plus) were arranged by publisher rather than by genre, as is done in the vast majority of bookstores.

When he bought the store, Lyons (MET'76) decided he'd have to make changes, starting with moving and reshelving miles of books. The staff had to create staging areas, where they could sort the books into categories: fiction versus nonfiction, and then major areas of fiction, such as mysteries. Non-fiction had many smaller categories—

Tom Lyons started his latest business venture at an age when many of his colleagues have retired. Below, his bookstore's unassuming exterior.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KALMAN ZABARSKY



biography, history, poetry, gardening, and art and photography, among others. And that meant many of the books had to be moved more than once.

Now 68, Lyons started his latest business venture at an age when many of his colleagues have retired. For decades he worked for companies like AIG, Wang, and Oracle, where he directed marketing for insurance. He later became an independent business consultant, advising insurance companies.

Lyons is well aware of the challenges he faces. Across the country, venerable indies such as Wordsworth, in Cambridge, Mass., Dutton's Brentwood Books, in Los Angeles, and Gotham Book Mart and Coliseum Books, in New York, have been shuttered, in large part because of the steeply discounted prices offered by Amazon.com and Walmart and the advent of e-readers.

But he points to an optimistic trend during the last couple of years. The American Booksellers Association, the national trade group for independent bookstores, reports that the number of independent bookstores actually has risen, from 1,651 in 2009 to 1,900 last year. “I just felt, yes, I can do this,” says Lyons. He hopes NEMBF will begin turning a profit by 2014.

Since he's become owner, Lyons has done much more than reorganize the books. A newly designed website has

ALUMNI NOTES

← [from page 67]



allowed customers to order books online for the first time, and it's now possible to order e-books online, as well as e-readers by Kobo. Lyons estimates that the store has increased its nonbook merchandise by more than 200 percent in the last year, which is critical to the success of an independent bookstore.

NEMBF has also launched an ambitious series of author readings, workshops, and special events. And the store has rebuilt its business selling books to local schools and libraries, which accounts for between 10 and 20 percent of its business. What hasn't changed, says Lyons, is the store's customer service—what he calls its secret weapon. Each of the nearly three dozen employees stayed on after he bought the place. “I love books, but I don't know books the way they do,” he says.

Lyons says the experience has been rewarding. “People ask me, ‘Are you having fun?’ Yes, I am having a ball,” he says. “It's a hell of a ride. It really is.” *John O'Rourke*

underwent its first flight in the second quarter of 2013. Friends and classmates can email David at david.dell@aero.bombardier.com.

HEIDI GEHRIS-BUTENSCHOEN (COM'90) of Cohasset, Mass., is a partner at Rona Consulting Group.

STACEY GIULIANTI (COM'90) of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., is chief legal officer at Florida Peninsula Insurance Company, a residential property insurance company that she cofounded in 2005. “We are the seventh-largest homeowners insurance carrier in the state,” she writes.

NANCY (DUVALL) HORNE (CAS'90) of Los Angeles, Calif., is founder of NDH Search, an architecture and design executive search and strategic global consultation firm. Nancy organized a three-day conference, beginning February 17, 2013, to initiate talks about the FIFA World Cup 2022 with Qatar Secretary General Hassan Al-Thawadi and Susan Ziadeh, the US ambassador to Qatar. The purpose of the meetings was to show examples of successful entertainment and sporting venues in Los Angeles.

DAVID REISS (COM'90) of Cockeysville, Md., was promoted to associate professor of electronic media and film at Towson University. He also is general manager of the university's faculty-supervised, student-run television station, WMJF-TV. Learn more about him at www.davidreiss.com.

JULIE (WALSH) UPTON (SAR'90) of Tiburon, Calif., published *The Real Skinny: Appetite for Health's 101 Fat Habits & Slim Solutions* (Tarcher, 2013) with Katherine Brooking.

1991

ROBERT CHRISTMAN (CAS'91) of Decorah, Iowa, was named the inaugural Kermit O. and Jane E. Hanson Professor in History at Luther College's spring convocation, on January 31, 2013. A member of the Luther faculty since 2005, Robert teaches courses in German reformation, Rome, and late medieval and early modern Europe.

JENNIFER (BLOCK) MARTIN (COM'91) of San Francisco, Calif., writes that her book, *What to Do When You're Dating a Jew: Everything You Need to Know, from Matzah Balls to Marriage* (Three Rivers Press, 2000), is available as an e-book. Jennifer, a copywriter at Wells Fargo, and her husband, Dave, have twin first graders, Marieke and Roy.

1992

ALICE (LESCH) KELLY (GRS'92) of West Newton, Mass., coauthored *Healthy Mom,*

Healthy Baby: The Ultimate Pregnancy Guide (HarperOne, 2013) with Siobhan Dolan. Alice is a book collaborator, journalist, and custom content creator. She has published seven consumer health books, and teaches undergraduate creative non-fiction workshops at Emerson College. Email her at alice@alicekelly.net, or visit www.alicekelly.net.

RALPH WALLACE (SED'92) of Sarasota, Fla., published the children's book *Tria Maria: The Cat with No Eyes* (CreateSpace, 2012), the true story of his family's rescue of a three-week-old blind kitten on the island of Rhodes in Greece. “It was near death, but we nursed her back to life, and, eventually, brought her home with us,” Ralph writes.

1993

ELISE KNEPPER (COM'93) of Pasadena, Calif., writes that after 10 years of selling real estate in Los Angeles, she has launched her own boutique business, the Property Shop LA, which represents home buyers and sellers from Venice to Pasadena. Email Elise at elise@thepropertyshopla.com.

GLEN WIGGY (MET'93) of Monument, Colo., published *1536 Free Waters and Other Black-jack Endeavors: Finding Profit and Humor in Card-Counting* (iUniverse, 2012), which chronicles his 800-plus visits to casinos while counting cards, from January 2001 to June 2008. Glen is a civilian at US Northern Command in Colorado Springs. Email him at gwiggy3@comcast.net.

1994

JENNIE E. BURNET (UNI'94) of Louisville, Ky., published *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

DAPHNE KALOTAY (GRS'94, UNI'98) of Cambridge, Mass., published her second novel, *Sight Reading* (HarperCollins, 2013) (see page 55). Visit www.daphnekalotay.com.

KENDALL MEADE (MET'94) of New York, N.Y., released a new album, *Wild Chorus*. Learn more about Kendall's album at the website www.ninemilerecords.com.

JOHN ROSENGREN (GRS'94) of Minneapolis, Minn., published *Hank Greenberg: The Hero of Heroes* (New American Library, 2013).

STEVEN WRIGHT (MET'94) of Roswell, Ga., earned a JD at Georgia State University and passed the state bar “as part of a family trifecta of graduations” in 2012. His son Geoffrey earned a BBA in accounting from Georgia College, and his daughter Stephanie

→ 71