

USF students and faculty remember Bayboro Books

It will always be here. Won't it?

For more than 30 years, the yellow bookstore was a hallmark of USF St. Petersburg. Students wandered in and came out with paper sacks containing something just right for them. Professors dashed inside for a book review. One English professor, Robert Hall, almost never left his post by the door where he sat smoking and grading papers.

It's hard to imagine the campus without Bayboro Books. But after serving the university community since 1982, the bookstore has closed its doors.

"I'm absolutely heartbroken," said J.M. Tschiderer, the USF special events coordinator. She worked for the university when Bayboro Books first opened. She never expected to see it close.

"It's especially bittersweet because while it's good to see things grow, sometimes the process of growing means you have to give up things near and dear to your own heart," Tschiderer said.

Some, like Tschiderer, remember the bookstore's beginnings. But even newer members of the USF community mourn its loss.

"It's sad to see a non-corporate bookstore close, one that's independently owned," said Megan Dorpinghaus, a junior at the College of Education. She said she always felt "comfortable" when she walked inside the bookstore because of its cozy atmosphere.

Unlike its competitor Barnes and Noble, Bayboro Books didn't sell Frappuccinos or Tazo Tea. Instead, it offered a personal touch. Long-time customers remember the hospitality of the bookstore owners, who knew the names of everyone on campus. They were never too busy to chat about books or the university.

The owners hand-picked books with their customers in mind.

Dr. Keith White, a USF English professor, said he often walked into the store and found a book he "didn't even know was available, and it would be the perfect book for me."

Sometimes he didn't have to walk inside. Eating lunch outside the Tavern, he was "seduced" by the books in the windows.

For White, it was a collection of Rumi poetry. For Tschiderer, Irish literature. Whatever customers liked, the bookstore carried.

Originally a woodcarver's studio, Bayboro Books was converted into a bookstore by four women: Marion Ballard, Sally Wallace, Martha Rudy Wallace and Marianne Rucker. Eventually, they sold the business to Susan Comas, who owned it for the past 10 years.

For the USF community, Bayboro Books was a haven of culture. Professors gathered to peruse the shelves and "talk politics," Comas said. Sometimes Dr. Hall recited Shakespeare. There were wine and cheese parties and book signings.

The owners' passion for books was contagious. If you mentioned a new book to Ballard, she'd give a "spot on" review, Tschiderer said.

Ballard said she always dreamed of owning a bookstore. Her favorite part was interacting with her customers. "People who buy books are nicer than people who buy anything else," she said.

Although Comas never planned on owning a bookstore, she shared Ballard's enthusiasm for reading. "I always loved books, libraries, as a kid," Comas said. "You know, quiet kid, bookworm."

Comas began her career in finance. The only thing she had time to read was the New York Stock Exchange regulations. When she became pregnant with her first child, she decided it was time for a change. Bayboro Books seemed like the perfect place to raise her little girl.

But times are tough for small business owners. Comas had to stop carrying trade books. She could no longer compete against Amazon, E-books and Kindle. Students still browsed her bookshelves but bought elsewhere.

Last December, Ballard sold the Bayboro Books property to John Gavan Benson, the owner of the adjoining Tavern. The change in ownership meant a rent increase for Comas. She said it was a sign to move on to something new. Now that the last books have left its shelves, Bayboro Books is no longer a part of the USF St. Petersburg campus. A university coffee shop has replaced the yellow bookstore.

But it won't be forgotten.

For 30 years, the bookstore united a literary community. Tschiderer said it nurtured the "scholarly well-being" of USF St. Petersburg. The literature once shelved in the bookstore is now scattered among professors' offices and students' homes. In his office, White can still point out the books he purchased from Bayboro Books.

The store was a refuge of personal service in a world of fast-food chains and automated voice mail. A place that recognized every member of its community and tailored the book selection just for them.

Bayboro Books “will be missed,” Dorpinghaus said simply.