

Another sad chapter

By DEB BRESLOW

BITTERSWEET. The moving truck, parked alongside Bennett Books in Wyckoff, had a job to do. Bookcases and fixtures were loaded into the truck while owners Betty and John Bennett looked on. After a 19-year run, they were closing.

Used books: two for \$1; remaining soft covers: filed haphazardly; specialty titles: stacked in boxes. I was compelled to take one last look. Amid stark surroundings, I recalled my many questions. I always got my answer — without being sent to a central information desk.

Searching for uncertainty on the owners' faces, I didn't find it. When you have to be sure. Respecting their need for privacy, I bid them well.

Can small bookstores survive? Conglomerates are taking over the book-selling market. The American public, accustomed to immediacy, would rather download travel tips, recipes and medical information than look in a book.

We also appreciate personal service and attention and welcome the opportunity to have our horizons broadened. Independent booksellers can make an impact by offering a verbal exchange of ideas.

Attracting clientele

Robert Kutik, owner of Womrath's of Tenafly (formerly Womrath's of Hackensack), has been in a bookselling family since 1949.

"You need more than a desirable location to bring in business," Kutik, who

The latest closing of a much-loved and respected independent bookstore is representative of change on a larger scale.

bought his Tenafly shop in 2002, said. "We assess programs to attract clientele every six months to remain competitive." The Bergen County blue laws, banning commerce on Sundays and on holidays, do not restrict selling books. Womrath's provides cross-merchandising: a wine-and-cheese event brings townspeople to the local cheese shop for tasting and a review of books on wine.

Personal service such as home delivery of books is offered to the elderly. Womrath's sponsors charitable luncheons for schools and religious organizations highlighting popular authors.

Nine years ago, Laura Heumer became owner of Goldfinch Books in Maplewood. "We are very fortunate," Heumer notes. "Our success is due to the conscience of the townspeople."

Heumer must be on top of strategies to compete with the big box stores. Her staffers, all residents of Maplewood, are underpaid. They remain because they love books and want to support customers in making the right choices.

Unlike the larger chain stores, Goldfinch Books has character.

"We stock books and gift items that people in town are interested in, such as art and music," Heumer said. "We're



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Bob Kutik, owner of Womrath's, at his Hackensack storefront in 2001 just before he closed it and moved to Tenafly. Last week Bennett Books of Wyckoff, New Jersey's largest independent bookstore, shut its doors after nearly two decades.

also aware of what the women are reading." Fifty book clubs order from the shop annually.

To a large store, staying in the black is easy. Without a new Harry Potter in 2007, Heumer worries about remaining solvent

A personal touch

Bookends in Ridgewood was purchased by Pat and Walter Boyer in 2002. There are four chain bookstores within 10 minutes of Ridgewood, including the tri-state's largest, Barnes and Noble. With fierce competition, Bookends thrives by promoting authors, a hand-selection of autographed books, Web-based communications and educational toys and games.

To ensure the best customer service, Boyer remains in the store while his wife, Pat, oversees event planning. The purchase of an autographed book allows customers to meet celebri-

sonal service, knowledgeable, responsive and motivated staff, convenient location, charming atmosphere, vibrant dialogue, and, perhaps most important to this avid reader, a recommendation for a good book.

It was Dad's birthday. The Barnes and Noble gift card was in my purse. Braving Route 17 traffic, I entered the parking lot. Circling three times, I found a spot. Once inside, I eyed the 15,000-square-foot expanse: a true "superstore."

Too many inquirers at the information desk; I located NON-FICTION. Book in hand, I waited on the winding line. Checking out, I dared to ask: "Have you read this? It's by Susan Cheever, daughter of John Cheever."

The twenty-something boy responded indifferently, "Who's John Cheever?" Bennett Books, I miss you already.

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