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A CHURCH BY ANY OTHER NAME

Meiners Oaks Bookstore Caters to Community

BY KIT STOLZ



Bookends from South Pueblo Avenue. Photo by Laura Guenther.

GLANCE AT THE SUBSTANTIAL

whitewashed structure — with a steeply pitched roof — standing at a corner in downtown Meiners Oaks. One might wonder: what’s up with that church? For the building, in fact, once was a church, but now is surrounded by icons and curios, including a backyard-sized Statue of Liberty, draped in festive lights, a small Airstream full of nature and outdoor living books, and an attractive garden patio.

If you don’t see the “Bookstore and Curiosities” sign posted high over the front door, you might wonder: What’s going on here?

At a glance, one thing is clear — this entire property has been remade with love, for the sake of attracting visitors to this literary haven

in Meiners Oaks. .

Inside the big white building you’ll find 20,000 volumes, each and every one neatly and thoughtfully shelved and, it turns out, thoroughly clean and dusted. This is Book Ends, one of the larger used book stores in the valley. Marcia Doty, one of the two partners who own the business goes over every incoming book with a large dry paint brush, wipes its covers clean, and, if the “gently read” used book deserves it, adds a collector’s style clear cover, of the same sort used by libraries.

This is a sanctuary, it’s clear, for books and for people who love books.

“People come in here every day and look around and often what they say is, wow, this is a real bookstore,” says Celeste M. “It’s a real compliment, and also it’s something I think

that people are missing in their lives.”

“A lot of people think we’re a library, when they first come in here,” Marcia notes. It’s a fact that the uniqueness of Book Ends takes more than a glance to appreciate. Among the thousands of books are small but well-curated exhibits, of Apple computers, going back to their early days in the 1980s, as well as a wooden phone booth full of vintage phones, and a well-curated display of uranium glass dishes, which glow as if lit from within. It’s not your usual bookstore.

Celeste Matesevac and Marcia Doty, the owners, moved to Ojai from Orange County in the 1990s, where they had worked in corporate jobs. Marcia had long had a professional interest in books, and haunted antiquarian stores and book fairs for decades,

thinking about a bookstore of her own, and dragging her partner Celeste along. Even the grim business of the Great Recession could not crush her dream, a dream that Celeste says eventually won her over. The partners bought the building in Meiners Oaks in 2011, and spent nearly a year and a half in preparation for opening.

During this time Ojai was losing bookstores.

“We had a dry spell,” Marcia says. “Bart’s was the only [bookstore in Ojai at that time], and they didn’t offer many new books. It forced you to drive to Santa Barbara, and even on State Street bookstores were closing.”

The fact that independent bookstores — in Ojai as well as around the country — were failing, and that even the national chain store Barnes and Noble was repeatedly threatened with bankruptcy, did not shake her optimism.

“I did not see the death of the printed word,” Marcia says without the slightest smidgen of doubt in her voice. “That was not in my consciousness.”

“I will say that this store could never happen in Orange County,” Celeste remarks.

Book Ends opened in December 2013, and turned the corner towards profitability for the first time last year, the partners say.

“Marcia always said that there would be room for a bookstore like ours, even in a small town like Ojai, because we were going to be different from a store like Bart’s, and were going to focus on a different kind of book,” says Celeste.

“People love their books and when the time comes to pass them on, they want them to go to a good home,” she adds. “We respectfully acquire books. When someone is divesting of their Civil War collection, they want to know that those books mean something, and that they’re going to the right place. They know that Marcia will find them a good home.”

Celeste and Marcia stress that they are not in competition with other book outlets in Ojai.

“All of us help each other,” Marcia says. “Bart’s sends customers to us, and we send customers to Bart’s, as well as to Twice Told Tales [the library outlet] and to the Krotona and the Krishnamurti libraries.”

Book Ends specializes in books on conscious living — with sections on philosophy, Buddhism, and Krishnamurti —

as well as books on the history of ideas, and also offers a substantial non-fiction section, and sections on Ventura County history and the Chumash. Marcia is particularly proud of the children’s book section, the popularity of which took her somewhat by surprise. Marcia and Celeste stress almost as one that they attribute their success to the “village

in Meiners Oaks, including Papa Lennon’s, Greater Goods, the Farmer and the Cook, and Book Ends.

Book Ends won “Merchant of the Year” for 2018 from the Ojai Valley Chamber of Commerce. Celeste notes this with satisfaction, pointing out that a mentor in the bookselling business — who for decades



Marcia and Celeste. Photo by Laura Guenther.

environment” of Meiners Oaks and Ojai.

“Meiners Oaks has always been a bohemian community,” says Celeste. “We’re living in a resort here. That’s my perspective. It’s a way of life and a way of business and it’s part of what makes Ojai, Ojai.”

Celeste sees the tourist trade as central to Meiners Oaks and their business from the start.

“Los Angeles people have been coming to this area for years, to go to Matilija Hot Springs, to eat here, and now they find us,” she says, adding that Ojai Chamber of Commerce took concierges from Ojai hotels and inns and other accommodations on a tour of attractions

owned three bookstores in the Pasadena area — told Marcia that she was “absolutely insane” for having exhibits in the store, because it substantially reduced the amount of storage available for books for sale. But Marcia really didn’t care.

“She especially loves taking kids over and showing them dial telephones and typewriters,” Celeste says. “This is more than a business for us. It’s fun to be here. We’re living our dream.”

“It’s not about getting rich,” Marcia says. “This is about enrichment.” ≈00≈