



Tom McDonnell reads to daughter Holly, 3, at Dog Ears Bookstore, a nonprofit that was formed three years ago. Charles Lewis / Buffalo News

Nonprofit bookstore community gem

Fills a huge need in S. Buffalo
area

By Anne Neville

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Everyone from the Internal Revenue Service to customers who come in off the street to buy a best-seller initially raised their eyebrows at the concept of a nonprofit bookstore.

But Dog Ears Bookstore and Enlightenment Literary Arts Center on Abbott Road in South Buffalo is not only legally a nonprofit, it's also easily explained.

"If this bookstore makes \$200,000 this year, I won't be a rich man," says Tom McDonnell, 43, who opened the bookstore three years ago. "That's not my money, it's the organization's money. If it makes \$10,000 a year, let's hope I wrote enough in grants or took in enough private donations or event revenue to pay for upkeep of the building."

The bookstore, located behind Caz Coffee Cafe, fills a huge need in the South Buffalo neighborhood with inviting shelves of best-sellers, adult fiction, self-help and biographies, as well as local authors. A side room is packed with books for toddlers and young readers. The back room is a comfortable place to sit.

McDonnell, a longtime bartender who still pours drinks once a week at O'Daniels, saw the potential, and the need. "I honestly thought this idea was a no-brainer when I started," says McDonnell, who has a bachelor's degree from Buffalo State College and a master's in secondary English education from Canisius. But he felt stifled in schools. So he and a group of friends hatched the idea of making the bookstore nonprofit.

The plan was to sell books to support the many programs offered at the Enlightenment Literary Arts Center, a high-flying name McDonnell now admits was born of ambitious

enthusiasm. Since the place opened, thousands of people have stepped through the doors to browse for a book, pick up a special order or participate in fiction writing classes, poetry readings or the many programs for youngsters.

Many of the programs are held upstairs, formerly a rundown residence, now a bright, airy room with green, blue and purple bookshelves and furniture and comfy couches. A computer nook was funded by Ben and Tiffany Sayers of Sayers Technology Holdings and VOiP Supply.

But books are clearly the stars here. Shelves full of books are sorted by genre to be delivered to seniors who receive Meals on Wheels. "Every second Friday, they get two books with their meals," says McDonnell.

The program started with South Buffalo, but has expanded to three adjacent areas.

“Our goal was to take care of South Buffalo, but why stop there?” he says. “I’d love to go citywide.”

Book recipients are surveyed about what they like to read.

“You do this stuff and you don’t think you are making a big impact, but the Christmas cards I got were amazing. One woman had me in tears — she told me I make her week,” McDonnell said.

The senior program is important, but McDonnell’s heart is clearly in the work he does with children. He and wife, Maureen, have three: Catherine, 7; Luke, 5; and Holly, 3. All love books.

Last year, with a small grant secured by Assemblyman Mark J. F. Schroeder, the Enlightenment Literary Center offered a three-month after-school homework assistance program. A team of teachers and other education specialists is meeting monthly to plan a revamped version for next year.

Meanwhile, McDonnell, who staffs the bookstore with the help of “an amazing group of volunteers,” seems to relish his hectic days. On one Wednesday in April, he and Maureen prepared craft materials and snacks, then McDonnell dressed as a clown to present a program with a circus theme for groups of children. When larger groups showed up than expected, McDonnell ran out in his clown costume to pick up more snacks and craft items. “We read three books, they had a snack, we made a clown face and we danced, and they said, ‘I did it at a bookstore,’” McDonnell says.

After a dash home for dinner with his family, he returned to Dog Ears to lead a book discussion group on Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina.”

The upstairs room is dedicated to Joseph “Micka” Callahan, the South-Buffalo raised, father of Patrick J. Callahan, president of DEMCO Demolition, the West Seneca company that demolished Memorial Auditorium and Yankee Stadium.

“He worked hard, and our whole family has the same kind of values,” Patrick Callahan says.

McDonnell calls Patrick Callahan, whom he met while tending bar in a restaurant, his “angel investor,” whom he says “gives and gives and gives, to a level I’ve never seen in my life.”

“I’m really trying to mind my own business and keep a low profile, but it’s nice to be able to give something back to the community,” Callahan says. “There are a lot of great, hardworking people here in Buffalo. We work nationally, and there’s nothing like the people here.”

Besides donations from DEMCO, Dog Ears is funded by other private donations and a wide variety of other sources. One major source of aid is the annual Gala, which will run from 7 to 11 p. m. Saturday in the Buffalo Irish Center. **Live music will be performed by Large Marvin**, and food will be offered by Caz Coffee Cafe, Tom Gang Catering, David’s Grill, Charlie O’Brien’s, Abbott Pizza, Curly’s, Imperial Pizza, Mulberry Ristorante, Cup Kate’s, Bravo Cafe and Catering and Hop Inn. Beer and wine are included.

The Gala also raises awareness of the bookstore and literary arts center’s programs. “Nearly three years after we opened, I still hear from people, ‘I never knew you were here!’” says McDonnell.

But McDonnell finds plenty of kindred spirits. Once, he tried to give a discount to a frequent customer. “I am not taking words off a child’s page,” the customer replied. “I pay full price.” McDonnell beams. “My man!” he says.

For tickets to the fundraising Gala, which are \$50, call 823-2665 or go to www.dogearsbookstore.org. A limited number will be sold at the door.

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