



A bookshop for curious people

by Katrina Turchin

Coming off the high of its first birthday, Glass Bookshop continues to show that local businesses can thrive even during a pandemic.

We live in a world where chain bookstores and sell-all websites like Amazon exist to run local businesses into the ground. What some businesses see as competition, Glass Bookshop sees as a way to prove their uniqueness. According to owners Jason Purcell and Matthew Stepanic, the difference is that while big-name stores are known for only providing products, Glass Bookshop prides itself on providing experiences.

“I think it was always the dream to have a store, and doing events was a great way to start connecting with the community,” says Stepanic. “We thought we could do something different that would bring some excitement.”

"My sense is that we don't view Indigo or Amazon as competition," says Purcell. "There's no competition whatsoever in their eyes, so we don't think there should be competition in our eyes either."

Established in 2018, the indie bookshop got its start doing pop-up events and markets. The idea for a bookshop came when Purcell and Stepanic sat down to decide what their futures may hold. At the time, Purcell was finishing up his MA in English at the University of Alberta, while Stepanic had started freelancing. Their connections and heavy involvement in the literary community inspired them to open Glass Bookshop.

It wasn't until Oct. 1, 2019, that Glass Bookshop opened its pop-up shop located in the heart of downtown. At the time, Edmonton only had one other bookstore, Audrey's Books, that sold books by independent authors.

The pair saw a gap in the Edmonton book market. They wanted to create an accessible space where authors could hold events, and the community could gather. City Centre Mall was that place. Its close proximity to public transit and the fact that the shop was wheelchair accessible was a few of the qualities that attracted Purcell and Stepanic. They wanted Glass Bookshop to be a place where everyone was welcome.

After a short five months of being open, Glass Bookshop shut its doors because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Purcell and Stepanic used this deterrence to hit the ground running.

"Matthew and I both knew when it came to the shop that we were likely going to want to close our doors, even before any mandate came down from the government," says Purcell. "We realized that we needed to change the business model to something that allowed people to stay in and stay safe, still being able to get books."

Shortly before they closed shop, Purcell and Stepanic began working on Glass Bookshop's website so that people could place orders. The duo felt that the best way to serve the community when everyone was stuck at home was to ensure that people continued to have access to books. They decided to offer a free city-wide contactless delivery service, which they run out of the Mercer building, with no minimum purchase so that anyone could order books and receive them quickly.

While there was a massive burst of orders at the start of lockdown in March, they've continued to see an increase in orders as their in-person shop has stayed closed. Many organizations, teachers, and professors have supported local by shopping in bulk, which has helped them continue their success.

Lauren Bernakevitch, a business student at the University of Alberta, was introduced to Glass Bookshop when one of her professors told his students they had the option of ordering their required books from there.

"I think it was a really smart idea on my professor's end," says Bernakevitch. "Not only was he able to get better service for us as students, but our money was able to support a local business instead of going into the vacuum of a corporation."

Purcell and Stepanic wanted their business to focus on the community's wants and needs. To ensure this, they based their business model around a concept created by Harvard Business Prof. Ryan Raffaelli, who specializes in independent bookshops. He coined his model the "Three Cs": community, convening, and curation.

Glass Bookshop makes a point of carrying what you wouldn't traditionally see in a chain bookstore. They give special attention to giving shelf space to LGBTQ+ and racialized writers, as well as independent publishers. Recently, they've been highlighting anti-racism books and books by black writers on their website.

"We are stocking books that our community members want and that people in our neighbourhoods or our city are looking for," says Purcell, touching on the community and curation aspect. "We're not just stocking bestsellers or whatever Oprah, or Reese Witherspoon are saying to read. We're doing the work of getting to know our community and bringing in books that are relevant to them and their needs and their experiences."

As for convening, Glass Bookshop used to host plenty of authors who held book launches. While they don't plan on having any in-person events anytime soon, Purcell and Stepanic hope that in the new year, they can re-open their shop to the community and continue to be a "gathering space for curious people."

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