

Small Business Saturday: The businesses that make our town, the town that shapes our businesses

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Just Imagine! opened at its location in Ridgecrest on 827 N. China Lake Boulevard in 1990 with a simple inventory of basic toys and education supplies.

"Our experience was in education, not retail," said Just Imagine! co-owner Virginia Henry. She and her husband had been teachers living in the Bay Area. They got the idea for opening their own toy store after years of shopping for gift ideas with their daughter when she went to her friends' birthday parties.

"Nothing spoke to us," Henry said. The big box toy stores had become bland and unengaging, she thought. They wanted a toy store that was tactile and creative. With their newfound passion and history in education, they set out to open a store with toys that would spark curiosity. They wanted a toy store where kids could come in and just imagine.

They got the idea to set up shop in Ridgecrest after talking to Henry's brother, who told them it was a small, rural town that didn't have many toy shopping opportunities but did happen to have a large number of scientifically-minded families. They opened there with toys and their education supplies, but the shop quickly began to take another shape.

What Henry came to realize, along with many other small business owners in Ridgecrest, is that small businesses are not like a triangle-shaped block trying to fill a triangle-shaped void in town. Instead, the small business is like filling the void with Play-Doh; if the business owner remains pliable and listens to their customers, they can mold their shop to the needs of the community.

By listening to their customers, Just Imagine! quickly expanded their inventory to board games, graphic novels, comic books, model crafts, and so on. After a few customers asked about it, Just Imagine! began carrying a card game Henry had never heard of before. It was called Magic: The Gathering. Two decades later, Magic is a major sustaining force for Just Imagine! They host weekly tournaments called "Friday Night Magic."

"We're fortunate to have a small core of dedicated customers," Henry said. They also host Dungeons and Dragons on Wednesdays, board game night on Thursdays, and occasional events on the weekend depending on what the community wants. As the owner, she has the flexibility to meet community desires in a way that big box chains can't.

Her story shares a theme that runs through almost all of the small businesses in a rural city like Ridgecrest. Red Rock Books opened in the early 2000s as a used bookstore,



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Virginia Henry (right) stands with Olaf Doud (center) and Joseph Ettling in Just Imagine! at 827 N. China Lake Blvd.

and eventually evolved into its current shape as a hub of the town's events. In addition to selling books, cards, gifts, and variety of oddities, the bookstore is also a regular stop to pick up tickets for any local event. They don't earn commission from the tickets, but it gives the store some visibility and it provides a service the area needs.

Red Rock Books owner Ann Rizzardini said that her father started the shop after the building had been in the family for years. Rizzardini grew up in Ridgecrest, then moved away for university where she earned an English degree. She said that she never planned on moving back to Ridgecrest until her father said that he wanted new management for the bookstore. She took the offer, and now, 12 years later, says that she can't imagine herself in any other career.

Like Just Imagine!, Rizzardini took the bookstore and began tailoring its offerings to the community. She began testing out cards and gift items, found a good response from



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Red Rock Books owner Ann Rizzardini stands among her many shelves of used books at her shop at 206 W. Ridgecrest Blvd.

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BUSINESS

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customers, and expanded that section. She also helps customers order items online if they can't find it in the store.

She said that business is doing well, though it's "consistently inconsistent." There are seasons where sales are strong and seasons where they're low, but she gets by. One thing throwing a wrench into business these days is the prevalence of online shopping. While she said she understands that online shopping is great for ordering one specific thing, coming into a bookshop is better for introducing you to new things.

"You could hop online and order if you have something specific online, but it's nice to have a place to go wander around and find something you weren't necessarily expecting," she said. She added that it also keeps the money and business within the community.

The Internet is changing the landscape of just about every aspect of life, and small businesses are not immune even out here in the Mojave Desert. Henry said it's a landscape that Just Imagine! is still learning to navigate. While she also understands the convenience of ordering online, she said that it's not the same experience. Kids care about how a toy feels, how it sounds. Just Imagine! lets them test drive the toys, so to speak.

Fin-N-Fur II co-owner Paul Wheeler believes internet shopping is even more common in rural areas like Ridgecrest as it can provide the convenience of a variety of choice to an area where there may not be that much choice. Still, he echoed Henry's statement that you can't beat seeing and feeling something first hand before buying it. It's true for toys, and, for Wheeler's business, it's true for pets as well.

Fin-N-Fur II is relatively new; it held its grand opening in March this year. Despite the name, there is no Fin-N-Fur I around now. Wheeler said that his brother had a shop called Fin-N-Fur decades ago, and Wheeler wanted to name his new shop Fin-N-Fur II as a way to honor him.

Much like the other small businesses, Wheeler was looking for what the community wanted when he opened Fin-N-Fur II. On top of always liking pets, he said that he heard a big box chain was planning to open their doors in Ridgecrest, but then cancelled. He took this to be a sign that a pet store would



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Fin-N-Fur II co-owner Paul Wheeler (center) and his family stand outside their new pet shop at 207 W. Ridgecrest Blvd.

be welcome here.

He took note that there are already dog and cat supply stores, so he went for the variety pet shop. Fin-N-Fur II carries both saltwater and freshwater fish, reptiles, rabbits, birds, and supplies for them all. He told the Daily Independent that it's tough starting a new business, but they're making it.

"We're not making a killing, but so far so good. We're paying the bills," he said.

At a small business pet store like Fin-N-Fur II, customers are welcome to interact with an animal before taking it home as a pet, ensuring that the connection is right between the customer and their new furry, scaly, or feathery buddy. In addition, Wheeler said you can't beat the service at a small business.

"The workers are also the owners," he said. They're invested. This also allows them to run the business their own way. Wheeler

said that when they feel like it, they let one of the lizards rummage freely around the shop to gobble up any bugs that may have gotten in.

Like the other businesses, Wheeler was adamant about the importance of listening to his customers.

"We have the best customers in the world," he said. "They're friendly. They're supportive. They talk and share information with us. I've learned a lot just by talking with my customers."

He doesn't plan to expand the business into dogs and cats. He said there are other places in town for that, so he sees no need for it. In fact, he said that when a customer comes in asking about dog supplies, he'll recommend the customer to one of the dog shops in town and those shops recommend customers to him when appropriate. In this way, each small

business molds itself to the community, and the collection of small businesses themselves take a shape to reflect the city.

This bond between small business is one of Ridgecrest's greatest strengths, according to Ridgecrest Chamber of Commerce CEO Suzette Caufield. She said that the businesses in Ridgecrest work together to form their own community, with many business owners going out of their way not just to make sure their own business grows, but to make sure the city grows together.

"People who own a business here generally made an intentional decision that this is where they want to be," Caufield said. "I see a strong business community here in Ridgecrest. Working together and being involved in events like Small Businesses Saturday will continue to strengthen our businesses and economy."

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