

OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

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By SUSAN McMILLAN

Driving out of Burlington, south on Route 7, furniture stores and car dealerships quickly give way to barns and open fields. As you crest a long hill, the narrowing Lake Champlain and the Adirondacks rise up, a vista reminiscent of fjords. Turn right at the Charlotte light toward the Essex ferry, and you'll see a neat white house with brightly striped awnings, a picket fence, a brilliant blue sign – and a rainbow flag. You are about to enter a world of color and chaos and kids: The Flying Pig bookstore.

Who would be crazy enough to buck the trend of independent bookstore closings by opening a boutique shop in “downtown” Charlotte? Two amiable bibliophiles, Elizabeth Bluemle and Josie Leavitt, would be that crazy, and they say this enterprise is purely a labor of love.

Thirteen years ago, a love of reading brought these women together. Josie (39) and Elizabeth (40) met when they were literacy volunteers in New York City. With vague plans to teach and write, they moved to Vermont in 1996. Within weeks, a small cottage – at various times home to a market, a café, and the post office – came up for rent in Charlotte. Josie and Elizabeth wondered how this space might be maintained as a gathering place for the community. Ten weeks later, without a business background between them, they opened the bookstore.

Now in its eighth year, The Flying Pig has seen its first young customers go off to college. “It’s phenomenal to see kids grow,” Leavitt says, smiling as she recalls a child who fondly called the store “Josie’s House.”

They’ve watched little readers grow up, and they know each of their customers by name. Not surprisingly, this one-room establishment has a loyal client base. They know it’s summer when certain families walk through the door, just off the ferry and headed to camp. When kids come in to buy gifts for a birthday party, Josie and Elizabeth make careful recommenda-

PIGS do FLY!



This lesbian-owned bookstore is thriving, bucking a book economy that favors the big boys.

at left: Flying Pig proprietors Elizabeth Bluemle and Josie Leavitt

tions so the birthday child does not receive duplicates. Try finding that attention to detail at a box store.

Is this tiny oasis defying the trend of the monster book stores? Not really, Josie reports, but sales are up a bit every year. This colorful, fun-filled shop is bursting at the seams with 40,000 books, including 8,000

titles for adults. Although not often requested, they do have gay-family-friendly books. Many prices are discounted, including markdowns for teachers, librarians, and book clubs. And they will order any title you want. Although surely the ease of Internet book-buying is competition, Josie is confident that real book lovers will always want to hold a book, browse the

shelves, and touch the pages.

Are they following their bliss? “My whole life has revolved around books, kids, and writing,” says Elizabeth, who was “born to read.” They are passionate about their work and take great pride in “loving and reading the books” that they offer. Finding the right book for a child is a challenge and a thrill. You can feel the enthusiasm as Bluemle remembers a girl hugging a book, or finding just the right story for a boy who thinks he’s not a reader. When asked for a list of all-time favorite titles, Elizabeth is speechless. It’s an impossible question for a woman who has read thousands of books since she picked up her first, at the age of three.

Leavitt and Bluemle are having fun, but it’s a lot of work too. I wonder aloud how working and living together affects their relationship. Josie replies, as if it is obvious, “I’d rather spend my day with Elizabeth than anyone else.” Elizabeth is more contemplative about their shared labor. “There’s just a balance between us,” she says, and that rapport is palpable. While being interviewed, they spar and laugh together, actively assist several clients, and speculate as to which of them left the stack of *Diary of Anne Frank* books behind the counter.

Both women have interests outside the store. Josie logs volunteer hours next door at the Charlotte Fire Department as an EMT and is training to be a crew chief. When not in the store or saving lives, she is enrolled in an on-line script-writing course out of UCLA. Elizabeth is in an MFA program, has recently kick-started the Charlotte Town Players, and will see her own children’s book *My Father The Dog*, in print in 2005.

When asked if they are accepted in this small town, Josie says without hesitation “We are seen as a couple when folks want to see us that way.” When these wonderfully engaging women announced their Civil Union in *The Charlotte News*, they received many congratulations. Josie shrugged as she remembered more than one

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Under the Same Roof: R.U.1.2? & MPM Share Space in Downtown Burlington

By SUSAN McMILLAN

Beginning on April 1, two of Vermont’s great LGBT resources will cohabit offices in

downtown Burlington. R.U.1.2? Community Center and Mountain Pride Media, publisher of *Out In The Mountains*, are relocating to 34 Elmwood Avenue, across from the main post office. The move makes

room for RU12?’s new services, and with shared space and office equipment, both organizations will maximize their resources.

After 18 months of discussion, the relocation became a neces-

sity when R.U.1.2? recently received funding for two initiatives. The new programs, www.VTM4M.net and the David Bohnett Cyber Center, will greatly expand the community center’s services. The cyber center,

opening in June with eight computer stations, will be available for public use, including low-cost or free computer access, classes, and tutoring. A newly acquired contract with the cont’d on p. 3

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