

# Sprouting new roots: Linden Tree bookstore changes identity amid industry shifts

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Like many kids born in the digital age, Los Altos resident Mason Knapp isn't immune to the lure of video and computer games. The fast-paced, action-packed simulation strikes a certain chord.

But when it comes to digesting literature, forget the LCD and pixels. He's all about the sheets and ink.

"I like to go online and read, but holding books is better," the 10-year-old Los Altos resident said while browsing hardbacks last week at Linden Tree Children's Books.



Photo Elliott Burr/Town Crier

Longtime Los Altos residents Jill Curcio, left, and Dianne Edmonds browse the stacks at Linden Tree Children's Books, which they co-own. The store is relocating up the block to 265 State St. next month.

Mason's mother, Anne, put it this way: "Images move by so fast on a lighted screen. ... Books slow (children) down and are calming."

While e-readers – the digital tablets that enable volumes of on-demand reading – proliferate, and purchasing deeply discounted prose online continues to disrupt the publishing industry, Linden Tree's new co-owners aren't sweating it.

They're banking on its founding principles – and readers like Mason.

"We do believe books are important for children's imaginations to grow," said Jill Curcio, paying homage to the independent store's tagline: "Books do change lives."

Dianne Edmonds, the other new owner, added that children's books in particular remain a pillar of publishing, because they produce experiences and memories, especially through their illustrations.

## A new store, look, name

Borders, the national bookseller chain, filed for bankruptcy earlier this year and has been closing its stores across the country. Linden Tree's new co-owners, however, predict a bright future.

In fact, they're relocating and upgrading to a new 3,200-square-foot store across the street and just a few doors down at 265 State St.

The owners said the relocation will ensure the store's "long-term sustainability."

"The offer for a new and improved site, with a better location and favorable lease terms, couldn't compare to the current situation in which we don't know the long-term plans for the existing site," Edmonds wrote in an e-mail.

Edmonds said the bookstore and its employees are scheduled to reopen Oct. 6 at the former site of Los Altos Card and Party – currently in a smaller space next door. Before that, the tenant was movie-renter Videoman. (Before that, Russell Houston Clothiers)

The move accompanies a paradigm shift in the way Edmonds and Curcio are positioning the company – everything (except its books) from the store's familiar physical appearance to its name is undergoing an overhaul.

"Our vision is to modernize and bring the logo and look and feel of Linden Tree to current times. ... We wanted to make it look more organic and timeless," said Edmonds, a former corporate financier and inventory manager. "We need parents coming in to say, 'Hey, I feel comfortable in here.'"

According to architectural drawings, the new store will feature a more longitudinal layout as well as modern shelving and design. Two abstract shapes strongly resembling trees will frame the central cash register, while rows of books flank the central walkway.

But part of what makes the current Linden Tree a destination, Curcio suggested, is its courtyard. And they can't bring that space with them.

To compensate for the loss of the popular feature, a reading room in the back of the store will sport a flat-screen television set. Wait – a TV in a bookstore?

That's for video conferencing with authors who might not be able to travel to Los Altos for talks and signings, Edmonds said.

"Publishers are cutting back on promotional tours," she said. "They can't go to 40 cities in 40 days anymore."

Curcio, noting that the store can order literally any printed book in existence, said they hope their rebranding efforts will draw in not just parents and children, but those in-between, too.

"We want to reach out to older kids, too, with our sophisticated feel," she said.

A representative from Linden Tree's new landlord, Los Altos-based Passerelle Investment Company, was optimistic.

"We feel that the combination of its longstanding, positive reputation in the Peninsula community, along with its fresh interior and colorful image, will enhance its appeal," Passerelle's Taylor Robinson wrote in a statement.

Passerelle, which has recently purchased several downtown properties, renovated the new Linden Tree location. It also rebuilt the old Cottage Green property on First Street, now occupied by Bumble Cafe.

## **No more recordings**

But part of Linden Tree's rebranding means less of an emphasis on recordings. The two owners dropped the "R" word from the title altogether.

While Dennis and Linda Ronberg, who sold the company last year to Edmonds and Curcio, had grown their selection of children's recordings and were the first to bring children's musician Raffi to Northern California, Edmonds said that sector isn't as profitable these days.

"Everything's going digital – it's no different than Tower Records," Edmonds said, referring to the music and movie seller's 2009 bankruptcy filing.

Instead, Curcio, who interacts with publishers and buys most of the store's books, with Edmonds will focus on stocking their spanking new shelves with more of what people want to read – both traditional and new.

Edmonds said they're already purchasing books for their spring collection.

So with the retooling of marketing and interior design, will people still recognize the venerable retailer? It's been a challenge, Curcio said, but the two feel strongly that the community supports local institutions and children's books enough that they'll appreciate the changes.

### **Competing with computers**

Consumers regularly flock to Amazon.com to sift through the same books found in stores. The only difference is price. And it can be a big difference.

But Curcio said the irreplaceable aspects of brick-and-mortar operations keep the faithful returning to their store.

"We provide knowledgeable booksellers who nurture relationships with the individual customer to ensure that the customer is making the best possible choice of purchase," she said. "Is Amazon providing that individual attention?"

### **Not the first move**

The Ronbergs opened Linden Tree Children's Recordings & Books on First Street in 1984. It wasn't until five years later, when they needed more space, that they relocated to the 3,460-square-foot site on the corner of State and Third streets.

While recordings remained an integral part of the Ronbergs' operations, Dennis admitted they were "stuck a little bit in history."

"We knew the artists more than (Dianne and Jill) do, and we have a slightly different perspective," he said.

Dennis said from what he's seen of the new owners' plans for his namesake store (Linda + Dennis = Linden), he's excited.

"I believe it will have a nice overall look," Dennis said in a phone interview with the Town Crier. "Ours, you might say, is a hodgepodge."

And even though the couple sold the store (due partly to Dennis' declining health), he said has no reason to think people will stop buying books – even in the face of competition from their digital counterparts.

Books are "something that's so ... simple. There's nothing to break down," he said.