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# The Great Used Book Battle

By Lou Fancher

*(Editor's note: We visited the Orinda Safeway at press time and there were no traces of the blue bin.)*

In every battle, iconic images capture the essence of the conflict.

In World War I, it was Uncle Sam, pointing out of a poster and stating, "I want YOU for U. S. Army."

Today, in Lamorinda, blue donation bins bearing the words, "Donate to Charity," have come to represent the struggle between Thrift Recycling Management (TRM), a national used book reseller, and local library groups.

Based in Lakewood, Washington, TRM is a for-profit entity founded by CEO Phil McMullin. A recent \$8.5 million venture-capital investment is allowing the company to expand its partnerships with its non-profit branch, Reading Tree, and local charities across the country.

TRM's stated intention is to capitalize on the resale value of used literature while supporting charitable organizations and reducing the number of books headed to landfills.

Linda Landau, treasurer of Friends of Orinda Library (FOL), offered a different perspective on used books.

"Learn the facts before you donate," began a letter from Landau to library supporters. "Our Friends groups do a great job recycling books and we don't need to have them (and our source of funds) going out of the area," she continued. "Please keep the value of your donation here, not enriching an out-of-state for-profit corporation," Landau concluded.

When the first blue bins appeared in Orinda, and later, when an announcement from nearby Oakland heralded the collaboration between Safeway, Reading Tree and Reading Partners, an East Bay non-profit, Landau and her associates were alarmed.

The Oakland initiative, which will result in a total of 2,500 books being contributed to Brookfield Elementary School, Learning Without Limits, Think College Now Elementary, Berkeley Maynard Academy and Hillside Elementary School, will benefit the area's early reading programs.

Landau voiced concern that FOL's efforts not be construed as Orinda versus Oakland. "We are concerned that an important source of revenue for all libraries and Friends groups is threatened. We have the time and resources to work on this. Many communities, those who would suffer the most from the lost income, aren't able to take on this kind of effort," she wrote in a recent email. Although Oakland itself is not in Contra Costa County, Landau noted that everything in the Orinda library is available to all residents of this county through inter-library loans.

Sharon Lingane, Manager of the Lafayette Friends Corner Book Shop, agreed. "The Friends of the

Lafayette Library have been selling used books since 1967. They were able to donate over a million dollars to build the new library. We have 20,000 books. We have 150 volunteers. We sell hundreds of books every single week," Lingane wrote.

A call to McMullin asking him to respond to the objections—and to explain what percentage of the sales are actually donated to charity—garnered an immediate answer.

"If there is a library that is feeling threatened, I would be thrilled to know who they are," McMullin said. "I'm interested in making sure that they know we are there to support them."

Far from feeling supported, Lingane said TRM will interfere with the Friends' ability to help their library. "I would like the bin not to be at Safeway – unless the bin is put there by someone in the community and the proceeds go back into the community," she stated flatly.

With confusion about the relationship between TRM and Learning Tree and varying donation figures published in media reports, McMullin was asked for further clarification.

A Q and A fact sheet he forwarded about Reading Tree stated the following:

*Frankly, about half the books placed in the bins are damaged, unusable or unsalable for one reason or another. TRM converts them to pulp that is sold to paper mills. Some of the revenue from selling pulp, together with a portion of the revenue from selling books online, helps cover Reading Tree's operating expenses.*

Pressed to provide a more specific donation figure, McMullin said, "We take the books and process them. Out of that processing we have a commitment to give back to the companies the books they most use. As a general rule, we give Reading Tree what they need: mostly children's books."

"They take the best books that get the best prices. If TRM sells them online, that directly cuts into our sales," Lingane stated.

"We are not skimming and taking the very best books. It's disingenuous to say that," responded McMullin.

But Lingane was insistent, saying, "In the long run, it's not going to be helpful for this community. It will end up in our bookshop not being able to survive, depending on how many people decide dropping the books at Safeway is easier. I don't want [people] to find another place to donate books that will compete with us."

The competitive challenge has galvanized both Orinda and Lafayette activists to request a meeting with Safeway. An offer to allow library groups to collect books from the bins was rejected as impractical, because many library volunteers are seniors.

Kathy Merchant, Executive Di-

rector of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation, encouraged library trustees to express their concerns to Safeway's senior management.

At press time, plans for a meeting with Safeway had stalled, after tense negotiations about who should have access to the community's books.

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