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A New Chapter in Kids' Bookstores Opens its Doors in Lafayette

By Lou Fancher



Daniel and Michele Collier with children Quinn, Chase and Bean came by on opening day at Bel & Bunna's. Behind the counter are Sam Nicholson and owner Clare McNeill. Photo Andy Scheck

Administration at Incapture Technologies LLC in San Francisco. The company at its peak had 80 employees and leaving it, she says, "I gave up a big salary, trust me."

But she didn't give up the savvy that put her in charge of a financial services company. Case in point: her co-investor, Anthony D'Silva, managing director of Incu Global, a capital management firm. "He heard I was looking for an investor at a social event on a Friday. He came over that Sunday and looked at my business plan and said, "I'm in." He knows we're not in this to make millions. We're in it to get one child to read one book and maybe, help him or her to have a life for the better."

D'Silva, according to McNeill, operates rather like a rough washcloth, whisking away the layers to ask "Why do you need it?" for each line item on the store's budget.

"You have to meet the bottom line," she says. "You have to offer something the customer wants. You have to give them the value added things: the book clubs, author readings, Saturday morning events and such."

A children's bookstore owner must also arrive with fondness for books and reading and a love for spending time with children. McNeill was born in London to Scottish parents: her mother was a preschool teacher who encouraged McNeill and her younger brother to read. "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" was a favorite, but so too were books by Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton; English artist Mary Tourtel's "Rupert the Bear" comic strips, fairy tales and more.

"My father had a tiny room he called 'the library.' It was floor to ceiling with books. He read anything. I recall him reading to my brother and me lists of people who died at the Battle of

Sometimes going out on a limb is the smartest way to go.

Embracing her wildest dreams with both eyes open, Clare McNeill launched Bel & Bunna's Books, an independently owned and operated children's bookstore in downtown Lafayette.

Sawdust disappearing just three days prior to the May 28 opening had the 46-year-old Walnut Creek resident beaming like the store's logo, a red-headed roughly 9-year-old version of McNeill created by designer Olga Lerner.

"It's insane, in a world where people buy everything from Amazon, why do a bricks-and-mortar bookstore?" she asks.

Of course, McNeill is anything but insane. Arriving from the U.K. where she ran everything from IT companies and startups to a 150-year-old church building and community center, McNeill was until June 2015 the Director of Finance and

Culloden (a battle in the Scottish Highlands)."

Today, the mother of 13-year-old James Moore and Joseph Moore, age 9, brings her boys home from their enthusiastic karate exercises at East West Kung Fu in Alamo to read the "Jedi Academy Series," "The Lord of The Rings," the Alex Rider books or "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu. "James, give him a book, he inhales it. Joseph, he asks why read 'The Hobbit' when you can watch it on television? I encourage him to read what he wants to read. There's nothing worse than being told what to read."

By allowing the same spontaneity of choice that had her selecting a friend's suggestion for the store's name - a compilation of her nickname, "Bel," and the name of her younger son's stuffed rabbit, "Bunna"- McNeill says, "It makes reading and books more personal if it's more personal for me and for them."

Until mid-June when a college student on summer break will lend assistance, McNeill will operate the store seven days a week by herself. Working from 10-6 Monday to Saturday and 12-5 Sunday and holidays sounds like a tall order - until it's compared to preparing and opening Bel and Bunna's.

"Doing this was nothing like what I'm used to. Dealing with the city, the county, the paperwork - everything costs money - it was far more than I expected. People have no idea that opening a retail business is harder than starting an IT." McNeill says she learned early on how to handle her frustration. "There was no point in my being cross with people. If you're kind, you'll find people are prepared to help."

Bel and Bunna's will not be a "Storyteller Two," a pale imitation of the beloved Storyteller Bookstore owned, founded and closed due to retirement in 2015 by Linda Higham. Although Storyteller's popular offerings will be true of McNeill's store - quality books, classic toys, a summer reading program, an approachable, warm owner and other specialties - a better location (near Paxti's in the shop that formerly housed Floret) is just one improvement. Promises of adventurous ways to choose books and McNeill's plan to write to every child who registers at the store add allure. "I want it to be fun to come read stories with Bel. I'm a viable alternative to an iPad. The struggle to put books in kids' hands is real, but I don't think it's out of reach."

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