

?Shop Local!? If only?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Remember back in the dark days of the pandemic when Councillor Tony Rosa posted well-crafted messaging on social media highlighting many of our local businesses? His earnest exhortation was how important it was to continue to shop and support local. Currently, there is a campaign called CaleDine promoting eating out at participating local restaurants between January 31 and February 13. These were, and are, good things. Whether initiated by the Town, the Chamber of Commerce or by other means of drawing attention to small, local businesses, for me, the idea is that we help to create and foster a community in part by the company we keep. Shopping locally means your next door neighbour can pay their bills, that your kid's soccer team has a sponsor, or that you get the benefit of sage advice, perhaps some specific help, or a recommendation that no 'big box' store employee might be able to give, along with friendly, personalized service. All of this is almost always on offer when you 'shop local,' except when it isn't, which might soon be the case at Forster's Book Garden in Bolton.

A part of the community since 1998, Forster's is a treasure trove of books, journals, paper goods, a plethora of book-related products (think bookmarks, funky specs, and more) and is a local distributor of Peace by Chocolate. For over 25 years, and through two store location moves, Donna and Paul ' and a succession of three, exceptionally delightful, if hairy, store greeters ' have catered to the reading tastes of Boltenites and beyond. Little ones being introduced to reading through picture books, teens finding favourite reads or support for high school English assignments and adults seeking fiction or nonfiction, have all found what they are looking for often with the very knowledgeable and enthusiastic help of Donna. Sadly, to quote Bob Dylan, 'the times they are a changin'.

It's possible that as soon as the end of February, Forster's will be no longer. No doubt there are many reasons for this, but our lost (or at least very much faded) sense of community is surely one of them. The sense of loyalty that once drove many of us to frequent the same establishments, where folks knew you by name, has now been replaced by the 'convenience' of Amazon and its ilk, but at what cost? For example, where else but at a local bookstore would a local author find support and a place for their book on the bookshelf? I'd venture to say that, for many, that would never happen at an Indigo/Chapters location. Where else but at a local bookstore would you find someone willing to help scour the shelves for that perfect gift for someone, running solely on 'she likes Wnglish murder mysteries with a twist, but I can't remember the author's name'? Perhaps you are looking to introduce your early reader to a book series and need some advice on age-appropriate content ' again that's a local bookstore to the rescue, one that's perhaps not so dependent on the big publisher marketing machine that pushes some collections to the front of store over what might be best for your own emerging literary fan.

Sure, there are other systemic factors too. As towns and cities grow, what are they doing to support the businesses that were there first and that helped to fuel that growth? Is there an effective Chamber of Commerce supporting small businesses? Is there the availability of great public transit providing teens with easy access to the store location that can either help them complete a homework assignment with just the right book or that provides them with an opportunity for part-time employment? Are there programs and services provided by the Town that help small businesses throughout Caledon to flourish, similar to the BIA that supports the downtown Bolton area? What about programs like the Caledon Improvement Plan that offers grants and incentives to renovate? Even when such programs exist, are they easy to navigate? If you are a tenant, what specific incentives are there for you to take advantage of, or that you could use to encourage your landlord to participate in for your mutual benefit? Is there more that we can, and should, be doing to help support these kinds of retailers? Through two different location moves, dedicated customers of Forster's Book Garden showed up to help them move books by the box load because as a community we believed in supporting local. I worry now that instead of showing up in droves in support, we'll simply lament the loss of yet another store on our social media feeds and then move on.

Forsters is but one example of many local businesses that might be struggling. I'm biased, of course, as a writer and indeed an author whose book once sat on their shelves, but losing small local businesses like this, in many ways speaks to the larger issue of community, or our lack of it.

The days of Harry Potter parties where all the kiddos dressed up to hang out at the local bookstore, that very essence of community, a place where we visit and where they might even know us by name, is slowly eroding away. It's true we are all leading busier lives, and as a result often settle for convenience over community, but wouldn't it be great if the community (the Town, et al) helped foster convenience instead, by providing the tools and resources necessary to make access to our local small businesses easier?