

Turned love for books into career

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At 79, Bill says it is time to retire. They plan to sell the building. The only books on their horizon are the ones they will read for leisure at their Prince Edward County home.

"This has been our life," said Ruth. "All the girls, the staff, the people, they've been wonderful."

W&R Greenley started after Bill's job as vice president of Hershey's Canada threatened to take him back to Toronto. The Greenleys had moved to Smiths Falls to get away from Toronto, so Bill and Ruth, a Stirling native and former English teacher, parlayed their love of books into a new life.

They searched Canada's east and west coasts for the perfect location, and scouted Ontario before settling on downtown Belleville. They set out to make the store accessible to everyone, from the avid to the fair-weather reader. They opened with a wide selection as well as some rare books. Bill loves the craftsmanship of old books, and is a collector of first editions by authors such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling.

The following years saw colourful stories and characters come through the shop. Bill recalls a visit from Don Cherry. Fans crowded into W&R Greenley for Cherry's scheduled noon appearance, many rushed in on their lunch break.

Cherry was late and the crowd grew restless. Cherry's representative eventually emerged and said Cherry was ill and still in the car.

Cherry finally appeared, complete with loud suit and starched collar, but after greeting fans and signing books, nearly collapsed.

Bill is not a fan of the big box book stores that now dominate the market. The Greenleys stock local authors, order from small publishers and sell books for modest profit, not stock options.

"There have been a lot of independent book stores closing, but there are more opening," he said. "I think there will always be room for them. It's a part of life. Things change."

Bill also sees the future of Belleville's downtown changing, from a commercial centre into something else — after it "started to shrink" during the 1990s. Big box stores, he said, are shifting the focus of downtowns.

He prefers the old way.

"When you get a retail store (in Belleville) that has headquarters in Toronto, and spend a dollar there, that dollar is in a bank in Toronto by nightfall," he said. "When you spend a dollar at a locally owned store, it stays in the community."

Outside the store Thursday, on an ever-changing white board, was a quote from Mark Twain capturing the store's inclusive atmosphere since 1980.

"My books are water," it read. "Those of great geniuses are wine. Everybody drinks water."