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Richard Gildenmeister: Half a Century Selling Books in Cleveland

This Labor Day Weekend, Shaker Square resident Richard Gildenmeister will celebrate 50 years as a master bookseller. In 1955, Richard came to Cleveland from his hometown of Bellevue, Ohio. In September of that year, he began selling books at Higbee's Department Store, and he's been putting books into the hands of the city's readers ever since.

Richard has dedicated his life to books. His has been a life of service to the people who write those books and to the people who read those books. For half a century in Cleveland, he has tirelessly cultivated the relationship between author and reader. He has served equally the national best-selling writer and the local first-time author, the learned intellectual and the just-learning-to-read individual, the wealthy bookstore patron and poor library denizen. He has coaxed hundreds of thousands of readers into bookstores and he has crisscrossed Greater Cleveland to bring the bookstore to the reader.

Novelist James Michener, inscribing one of his novels, "Book General, keep the armies moving," recognized Richard's innate ability to lead legions of readers to books. He is a man of incredible character with a passion for life, and he has loosed this energy onto the region for one abiding reason to – to promote books and reading.

Richard's personal library of books includes more than six thousand signed editions, and the messages that those authors have penned to Richard in the first pages of their books reflect the zeal with which he has promoted their works. Twice the Cleveland Public Library has exhibited famous and noteworthy books from Richard's library, as well as many of the personal letters he has received from readers, luminaries, politicians and novelists. As a whole they praise Richard's hospitality and mirth, and one can tell from reading them that their impressions of Cleveland were lifted up by Richard's vitality.

Richard's dedication to book promotion in Cleveland started in 1955 at Higbee's Downtown Cleveland Department Store, where he worked side-by-side with Anne Udin and

learned the business of books from her for 18 years. He often refers to this time as the “longest apprenticeship in history.”

When Cleveland Press Editor Louis B. Seltzer wanted to start a book and author luncheon, he turned to Dr. Fern Long, deputy director of the Cleveland Public Library. Long called upon Udin and Richard, who was then the associate book buyer and director of author promotions for Higbee Company. They recruited the sponsorship of Anne Levine of Publix Book Mart, and then went off to New York to line up the authors who inaugurated the Press Book and Author Luncheon. That luncheon eventually became the Cleveland Plain Dealer Book and Author Luncheon. Similarly, Richard helped create the Meet the Author Luncheon series at Higbee’s that raised money for the Women’s City Club.

From Higbee’s, Richard moved to Burrows Books and Stationery. He became the manager of the Shaker Square store, and was chief book buyer for all 26 Burrows stores. Then, at a time when the Cleveland outdoor shopping area Shaker Square was struggling to attract shoppers and merchants, Richard opened his own Richard Gildenmeister Bookshop on the Square in 1976. His store was an immediate hit, with Mayor Ralph Perk proclaiming it a savior for the Square.

At his beloved Shaker Square, Richard was one of the early founding members of the Friends of Shaker Square. He served two terms on the Board of Trustees of that organization.

Richard’s store on the Square eventually closed, and he went to work for Booksellers in Beachwood’s Pavilion Mall. Later, he worked for Appletree Books in Cleveland Heights. He returned to Shaker Square to join Joseph-Beth Booksellers as the distinguished Master Bookseller, and moved to Joseph-Beth’s Legacy Village location when the Shaker Square store closed.

But books are sold not only in bookstores. Richard discovered over the years that one good way to reach readers is to take the books to them. He attends numerous "outside" events, where authors speak and Richard sells their books. These events occur at schools, libraries, churches, synagogues and community centers, and have included The Intown Club of Cleveland, The City Club of Cleveland, the Council on World Affairs, Judson Wade Manor, Fairmount Temple, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, John Carroll University, 21st Century Club, and numerous libraries around town.

Richard has served on the board of trustees for the Friends of the Cleveland Public Library. He also served on the board of trustees for Fairview-based Youth Challenge, which provides recreation activities and sports for physically disabled children; he was instrumental in bringing major funding to that organization. Richard also is active at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, where he is a lector and usher, a member of the Men's Council and the Inter-Faith Hospitality Committee, and is a Stephen Ministry Caregiver.

Richard views bookselling as an extension of his personality and his personal life. He is flamboyant and friendly, clamorous and caring, helpful and hilarious. After 50 years and having sold hundreds of thousands of books to hundreds of thousands of people, he finds that the “big rush” for him is still when he can bring the book and reader together.

Many of those readers greet Richard when they see him. They thank him for a book recommendation, or for making a special effort to drop off a package of books to a sick family member. They ask about the health of the book business, and offer encouragement for his employers. They kid him and laugh with him. Richard talks to anyone and everyone.

Richard Gildenmeister is one of Cleveland's unique individuals. He has made a dramatic, though quiet, impact upon the region. The books in untold thousands of personal libraries are testament to that.

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