A Phoenix Rising from the Ashes: Webster’s is BACK

In 1999 the SBDC assisted Elaine Meder-Wilgus and her then partners to restructure and reposition a long standing local used bookstore. With SBDC assistance and bank funding, they opened a larger bookstore carrying both new and used books and the addition of a café, which became a community gathering space. Webster’s Bookstore and Café was conveniently located in a prime retail location in downtown State College for 11 years. Elaine, who eventually bought out her other partners, operated as a community based business which locals, over time, decided was essential to the downtown vitality of State College.

Then due to some unfortunate outside business decisions, that Elaine looks back on with 20/20 hindsight, coupled with a downturn in the economy in 2008, Webster’s Bookstore and Café struggled to support the cash flow for it and her other business ventures. Eventually she found herself behind in rent at the downtown property. In late June 2010, Elaine was notified that the lease would not be renewed. She had just over 30 days to sell inventory and vacate a property that her business had occupied since 1999.

The community outpouring of support was overwhelming. Community members raised funds to help her through the transition period. Volunteers showed up to help her move. Countless newspaper articles were written – presenting both sides. Webster’s was not just a business to the locals: it was a sacred institution that needed a new home.

As the weeks turned into months that turned into more than a year, at times it looked as if the beloved “Webster’s” would not be returning. However thanks to a community that believed in the business model, an owner who ate tenacity for breakfast, a benevolent new landlord who was passionate about the business model and to many resource partners who were willing to devote countless hours to creating a new and sustainable model, Webster’s celebrated its Grand Re-opening on April 14, 2012. (The top picture shows State College Mayor Goreham helping Elaine cut the ribbon. Below: patrons explore the newly remodeled space.)

Behind the scenes, one of those resource partners was the SBDC. Over the course of the 16 months that Webster’s was re-inventing itself, Elaine’s consultants ran many iterations of proformas, guided her in developing strategies to ensure the sustainability of her new business model, helped her with marketing ideas and in the end were instrumental in helping her plan an exciting Grand Re-Opening Event that had crowds gathering outside to celebrate her ‘rising from the ashes’. In fact her new membership program includes a custom made mug with the potters creating an image of a Phoenix embedded in the clay. What a perfect beginning to what the SBDC believes will be a long history in her new location.

In the end, Elaine succeeded in securing a term loan to finance the renovations to the new space, retained and hired a total of 12 employees and once again, is offering the community a place to gather, a place to enjoy the local arts and a place where buying local is their mantra.