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## The Upside: Westport Book Shop's Dual Mission

[Karen Sackowitz](#) - February 12, 2021

Three years in the making, the new Westport Book Shop has opened to the public with a dual mission to support the Westport Library and to provide meaningful employment to adults with disabilities.

The seed of the idea was planted in winter 2018, when Jennifer Bangser, director of strategic community partnerships for the Westport Library, traveled with a group from the Westport Commission on Disabilities to the Prospector Theater in Ridgefield.



*Customers browse the shelves.*

The Prospector is a nonprofit movie house that employs adults with disabilities. Inspired by what she learned, Bangser approached Westport Library Executive Director Bill Harmer to see what they might be able to implement in a similar way.

"When Bill asked me what I thought of the idea, I said, 'Oh my gosh, let me do that!'" recalled Jocelyn Barandiaran, president of the nonprofit Westport Book Sale Ventures Inc.

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“At the time, I thought we’d start out slowly by bringing on people to sort, price and organize book donations.”

Barandiaran was already imagining how the program could move beyond its annual book sales and provide more valuable experience for the adults with disabilities who would be working with them.

“I knew that we would need to open a retail environment, because that’s where you can create many more transferable jobs,” she said. “If I train you in a retail environment selling books, you can go to work at the Gap. You can work at Walmart. There are more visible jobs available.”



By March 2020, the organization had hired its first three employees for a pilot program within the used-book sale team. But as so many stories went at that particular time, the pandemic shut things down. The next several months were spent adjusting to new operational structures throughout the library; by fall, the book sale team was once again ready to try an employee program.

“It was serendipitous that in the beginning of the summer, Eileen Lavigne Flug mentioned to Bill Harmer that she really missed having a used bookstore in town,” Barandiaran said,

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referring to the Westport attorney and passionate community advocate. “She and I talked and we knew that with the cost of real estate in Westport, if we could find space at a fair rate and get enough founding donors to back the project, we would go forward. And that’s what we did.”

A group of 16 donors ultimately stepped up to help the library secure its 1,100-square-foot space on Jessup Road, which was leased from Admiral Real Estate Services of Bronxville. Inventory wasn’t an issue; given the cancellation of the library’s annual used book sales in March and July, there was an abundance of donated materials. The next step was finding employees for the program.

“We went into this knowing a lot about selling used books, but knowing nothing about working with people with disabilities, so we researched organizations who could help us,” Barandiaran said. “We connected with Star Inc. and Abilis, who worked with us to define specific job descriptions and tasks, and to understand the job-coaching element.”

Star Inc., based in Norwalk, and Abilis in Greenwich are nonprofit organizations that serve individuals of all ages who have developmental disabilities, including providing employment resource training, coaching and placement. Barandiaran said the bookshop’s first three employees came through the organizations, which also provided a job coach for each. In addition, there are more organizational supports coming to the shop.

“We’re talking to a couple of experienced managers who may job-share so that we can spread the hours out a bit,” Barandiaran said. “Right now, though, we’re keeping hours limited as we get our processes down. Our hope is that by the end of March, we’ll have our base secure so we can bring in new people with a consistent training environment.”

For now, the Westport Book Shop is open Thursdays and Fridays 3 to 6 p.m., and Saturdays and Sundays noon to 5 p.m. Covid precautions dictate that a limited number of shoppers can be in the store at once, which Barandiaran said also provides a calmer atmosphere for the trainees and a more pleasant interaction with customers.

“It’s been so nice to be in an environment where people are just glad to be there,” she said. “With masks, I’ve personally missed seeing people smile. But in the shop and hearing the comments, it makes for such a wonderful atmosphere.”