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Orinda Medicine Shoppe and Lafayette Bookstore: Two Businesses Competing With Big Boxes Honored

By Sophie Braccini



Alan Wong discuss supplements with customer Edith Black
Photo Sophie Braccini



Asma Abu-Taleb, Linda Grana and Dave Simpson
Photo Sophie Braccini

Alan Wong and Dave Simpson may never have crossed paths before they met at the Contra Costa Council's 10th Annual Small Business Awards Luncheon, on May 7th at the Concord Hilton. Though they operate in very different markets, medication and books, the award nominees from Orinda and Lafayette, respectively, have both chosen the individual entrepreneurship path in markets dominated by big brands. These businesses, honored by their respective Chambers of Commerce, represent the uniqueness and creativity of our communities; they make shopping downtown Orinda or Lafayette a unique experience, as opposed to so many other communities in which the shopping experience is limited to interchangeable malls with identical stores.

Alan Wong's Medicine Shoppe is located in the Orinda Village Square, near the Orinda Bookstore and McCaulou's. After being a pharmacist for Rite Aid and Walgreen's, Wong decided to open his own pharmacy in 2000. Entering his shop is like stepping into an old world apothecary store, where unique compounds are made and you can actually ask a pharmacist for advice. "When he first opened his shop, he was pleased to provide custom compounding for his customers to create medicines that were not available commercially," says Orinda Chamber President Sue Breedlove, noting, "The friendly atmosphere

Photo Sophie Braccini

of The Medicine Shoppe makes going to pick up a prescription an enjoyable venture. Alan has tremendous knowledge and is extraordinarily helpful and generous with his time."

Edith Black, who has been bringing her prescriptions to the Medicine Shoppe since its inception, agrees wholeheartedly. "Mr. Wong will go out of his way to help you," she said, "he knows me, what my needs are and he can give me advice." Wong agrees that advice is a strong part of his job, even though he calls it a normal part of the relationship that he has established with his customers. "My customers are like family, they come here with their children and the best part is when the kids do not want to leave." Wong says that a lot of the advice he gives has to do with drug interactions, or hormone replacement therapy for which he sometimes prepares specific compounds. "The level of service of the Medicine Shoppe is what will keep you returning and referring your friends and family to Alan's," adds Breedlove.

Dave Simpson of the Lafayette Bookstore thrives on the same concept of customer service. Linda Grana, the store manager, and Aleks Sedzielarz, the used book manager, help him in his work. "I was once told that the key to success was to hire people smarter than oneself," said Simpson, "that is what I have done." This year the Lafayette Chamber honors a business and a man that have succeeded in a terribly competitive market. "When 'big box' stores were eating independent book stores for lunch, Dave not only built a very successful business, quadrupling Lafayette Book Store's sales, he also carried the torch to help teach our community the importance of shopping local," said Lafayette Chamber Executive Director Jay Lifson, "His leadership and innovation have always been a driving force in Lafayette and in his industry."

In addition to expertise and customer service, there are other secrets to Simpson's success. First, there's his off-site custom bookstore event program. "We go to specific fairs and events and set up a themed bookstore made for that specific occasion," explains Simpson. In a large three-day long event he makes as much money as in a month and a half at the brick and mortar store in Lafayette. The second secret is his online used bookstore that reaches an international market and allows him to buy esoteric used books in Lafayette because he knows that somewhere in the world, someone will want it.

At this time, the lease on Simpson's store in the Clocktower Building on Mt. Diablo Boulevard is up. "We are negotiating with Main Street Property for renewal," said Simpson, "We are not sure that we will be in the same location come August."

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