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Supporting writers, a signature at a time

Date: March 28, 2005 **Page:** **Section:** Stacy Milbouer

When you think of patrons of the arts, millionaires' names such as Gates, Getty or Guggenheim might come to mind. But for local writers it's David Lacasse, a third-shift supervisor at a medical tray factory. I met him several weeks ago at Barnes & Noble where 25 local new authors gathered in the cafe to promote their books, which ranged in subject from childhood abuse to the ways in which the Arthurian legend applies to today's world.

He stuck out because he was the only browser who had a shopping basket in hand that was half full 15 minutes into the three-hour event.

Lacasse also stuck out because when some authors gently tried to push their books, he informed them that not only had he bought them already, but when and where he purchased them - usually at the author's first local book signing.

For the past 10 years the Merrimack man has indulged his passion of collecting signed books by local authors. To date he's amassed about 2,500. So many, in fact, that when the eldest of his three children left home, he turned his bedroom into a library.

Lacasse said he's not sure why he chose this as a hobby, but he knows exactly when it happened.

"It was 1994 and I went to Barnes & Noble in Nashua. There was a man there from Concord, Mass., who wrote a book about walking the Concord trail. I bought the book and he signed it. I thought, 'this is really cool.' I've been getting books signed by authors ever since. I clip out articles about the authors when I can find them in the newspapers."

The book lover said he's had authors sign his books under the strangest of circumstances in some unusual venues including post offices and bowling alleys. Once, he said, he was the only person to show up at a reading at a local bookstore.

"I figured I'd buy the book, have the author sign it and just leave," he said. "But instead, she stood up in front of me and continued on with her reading as if there were a roomful of people. Later she wrote in my copy, 'Thanks for the audience of one.' "

Lacasse, who holds a degree in criminal justice, is not just an avid consumer, he is an avid reader who favors nonfiction.

"I've always loved books as long as I can remember," he said.

And he is an ardent admirer of those who can write a book. His favorite author is Vermont mystery writer Archer Mayor whom he's met many times at book signings. But unbeknownst to him, Lacasse has inspired a few fans of his own - mostly those who run local bookstores and more than a handful of authors.

When Irish mystery writer John Connolly's latest book was released, he sent Lacasse a T-shirt with the image of the cover printed on the front. The author visits the Toadstool Bookshop in Milford once a year and splits his time between Ireland and New England.

Rhode Island author Jon Land inscribed this on one of his latest detective novels: "To Dave, prepare to be shocked. It's always a special treat to sign a hard cover, especially for a true fan. People like you keep people like me in business. Can't thank you enough for all the support."

"He's been here for everyone. He shows up for everything," said Sean Higgins who works at the Toadstool. "We have some regulars. But Dave is the guy you know, without a doubt, will show up at a signing. It's neat. It really doesn't matter to him what the genre of the book is. As long as it's local and the author will sign it. Although we know he does prefer hard covers. It's gotten to the point that when we have a signing, we just automatically put a book aside for Dave."

It's true Lacasse is not genre discriminatory. But he says it's unusual for him to buy poetry or cookbooks, although he has done both. And yes, he prefers hard covers, but he has just as many soft covers, (because of the boom in independent publishing) he said.

Merrimack author K **Spirito** has gone the independent route for the first four books in what she calls the LaRosa Chronicles, and Lacasse has bought each one of them.

"Even though we lived in the same town, I never knew Dave before my books came out," said **Spirito**. "At my first signing five years ago, he wasn't able to make it to the bookstore but he left word that he wanted one inscribed for him and to put it aside. So I never met this mystery man named Dave. When the second book came out there was a signing at the Toadstool and Dave was one of the first ones there. And I've known him ever since. He's a writer's dream. He's quiet and studious and you're wondering what's going on in his mind. And you realize that he's like having a patron, totally supportive of your career."

And although **Spirito** and other authors who know him have urged him to write a book of his own - perhaps based on his unusual hobby - he is steadfast in saying, "I don't think I have it in me."

So is there something else beside admiration that fires Dave's hobby?

"One of these days I think he'll hit the jackpot with one of his signed books," Higgins said. "We asked him - is this like playing the lottery for you? But it's not. It's just about his own collection."

Lacasse said he doubts that he'll ever recoup the \$50,000 or so he's invested in his hobby. Even though he has first editions signed by the likes of New Hampshire author Dan Brown of "DaVinci Code" fame, two past presidents and one past first lady (Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford and Hillary Clinton) that's never what it's been about for him.

"I figure my collection is never really going to be worth much. It's personal for me," he said. "I just like having the books around. Right now, I'm looking at these books thinking, 'I can't wait to read this or that.' I average about one book a week, but in the last two weeks I've read five of the ones I picked up at Barnes & Noble. Still, I figure I'll never have enough time to read all the books I have and all the books I'm going to have."

Lacasse said his wife is supportive of his hobby, even though in his words, "she's not too much of a spender." She's even been known to wait hours in line at a signing when Lacasse has a competing event elsewhere.

But Lacasse says "I have to say it does crack her up when I go to bed at night and say, 'Gee, I have nothing to read.' "

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