

Books, Brownies and Beans

A Brief History of the Event

The annual book sale known as Books, Brownies and Beans (coffee beans, that is), often referred to as BBB, is now going into its 16th year. From humble beginnings in a church that was only half the size of its present configuration, the sale has grown more robust each year. A true labor of love, the net proceeds from all of the sales have gone to service organizations in Thurston County, principally in support of the homeless population in the county. Every year it takes over two months to prepare for and requires well over 150 volunteers to accomplish many hundreds of tasks. But we love it, not only for the sense of community we build as we do the work, but the way it allows us to reach out into our greater community on sale day, all in the service of a worthy cause.

Books, Brownies and Beans began in 2003 when women in the “Build Your Own Theology” study group at the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation (OUUC) were looking around for a fund-raising project that would reflect the character of South Puget Sound. Acting on a proposal from Candace Mattson they decided on a used book sale.

During that first sale, homemade brownies and coffee were available from the church kitchen and music was provided by a pianist and a singer/banjo player. In one corner Jeannette Witcher, who co-chaired the event with Candy Mattson, read and told stories to children. It turned out to be a huge success. Over 10,000 books were donated and the sale raised \$2,000.00 each for the Literary Network of Thurston County and the church’s homeless shelter, Out of the Woods.

In the ensuing years Books, Brownies and Beans continued to be a big success, eventually moving from late January to the Saturday date in February that follows the President’s Day holiday. The exceptions were in 2006, when no sale was held because no one stepped up to lead it; and 2010, when the church was in disarray due to the building expansion that was under way.

In the beginning years, as boxes of books were collected, they were stored in a variety of homes and also in the basement of Out of the Woods. On the Friday afternoon before the sale the church sanctuary would be cleared and two large table spaces set up in the tiny foyer. As many rented tables as would fit were set up in the sanctuary. On Friday afternoon and evening a steady stream of boxes were brought in and the books were dumped on the foyer tables, separated as to fiction and non-fiction. The fiction, lightly sorted, would move quickly to the sanctuary sale tables, but the non-fiction would first move to other sorting tables right inside the sanctuary doors, then placed on the sale tables. For several hours the scene on Friday night would be one of bedlam, with volunteers moving books in every direction, but by about 9 pm the sorting would be complete. Excess books were placed in boxes under the sale tables, to be brought up on top the next day as space created by the sale of books permitted.

During the first three years of the sale the proceeds amounted to about \$4,000 each year. In about 2007 the OUUC Board was moved to dedicate all future proceeds of the sales to the Out of the

Woods shelter, and since the shelter's discontinuance the proceeds have continued to support homeless agencies operating in the Olympia area. In the years 2007-2009, net proceeds climbed from \$6,800 to \$8,900, partly due to sales agreements with the online booksellers who were the recipients of our unsold books. When they later sold "our" books we earned a percentage. A major improvement in 2008 was to contract for an 8' x 20' rental storage unit to be dropped in the OUUC parking lot for use from early January until the sale was over. This allowed all the books collected to be pre-sorted, re-boxed and stored in the rental unit during the weeks before the sale. With this, the Friday night sorting pandemonium was virtually eliminated.

In 2010, the church renovations taking place meant there could be no sale. Many members of the Congregation were heartbroken, for they loved the community spirit of the event as much as they appreciated the good that it did for the homeless. So, books continued to be collected, and online sales still brought in \$2,100 that year.

The year 2011 brought big changes, mainly owing to the completion of the church expansion project. For the first time the sanctuary could be used for fiction only, and non-fiction and children's books could move to the classrooms in the new Religious Education wing. The social space that was added with the expansion project (the Commons) meant the small "bistro" that had operated since the first Books, Brownies and Beans sale in 2003 could finally be expanded. The improved bistro could now include service from the renovated kitchen through the new serving window, an ample table and seating area, and continual entertainment, in half-hour increments, from 9am to 3pm. Also, credit cards were accepted in 2011 for the very first time.

In 2011 collection boxes were distributed throughout the Olympia area for the first time, with the result that never before had more books been donated. There were so many that probably 200 boxes of books never even got opened. They and the other leftover books that were turned over to Thrift Books, our online bookseller in 2011, netted about \$3,600, bringing the total net proceeds to about \$9,500.

The year 2011 was notable also for the weather. The worst of Olympia's winter weather hit on the Thursday before the 2011 sale. It was a good thing the final book sorting had been moved from Friday to Thursday that year in order to give us more time to set up. A good deal of additional sorting had to be done on Friday, because cold, snow, ice and blizzard conditions on Thursday prevented many volunteers from helping out, and the parking lot had become totally impassable. The parking area was finally opened up late Friday with the use of a tracked vehicle and the help of many volunteers shoveling snow off paths and walkways. No one knew beforehand whether buyers would brave the snowy conditions to get to the sale, so it was wonderful to see a long line waiting to get in when the doors opened on Saturday morning. Notwithstanding the snowy weather, 470 shoppers attended the sale.

From 2012 through 2018, operating improvements continued to be made every year. Almost all were incremental in nature, building on procedures that had been established over the years. From

early reliance on hanging a banner over Capitol Way and getting a timely article printed in The Olympian, our marketing strategy has matured enormously. The banner over State Street during the week of the sale is now hung by the City free of charge. Flyers are posted on many bulletin boards around town, radio and television (TCTV) announcements are made, emails and postcards are sent out to booksellers and others, and the sale is posted on Craigslist, Facebook, Meetup and other social media forums. The annual count of buyers increased to over 700.

In 2012 Kelly and Mary Ann Thompson suggested making Friday evening a party night, hoping that the sale of tickets to the event would cover all or most of the book sale's expenses and also create some excitement about it among OUUC members. Because the evening featured a "Gay Paree" theme, the event quickly became known as The Soiree, and the name stuck. Every year since, the Soiree has successfully raised over \$2,000, always more than just paying for expenses.

One thing lacking during the early years was a dedicated effort to provide sustenance to the workers who toiled on sort day and worked all-day Saturday. The youth classroom eventually became a combination "Green Room" for musicians and a sandwich-and-pizza haven for volunteers during break times.

All in all, Books, Brownies and Beans has been, and continues to be, a great success even though the income from remainder books has shrunk to a very small amount as the bookselling industry has contracted. It remains an exciting project for the OUUC community, and year after year it attracts lots of shoppers not only from our neighborhood but from the greater Olympia area. It has become so successful that the benefit to homeless organizations in the greater Olympia area usually totals \$10,000 or more. Since inception, the sale has contributed about \$120,000 to Olympia agencies that help the homeless, and each year books are donated to jails and prisons and to reading programs for children and youth.

There are some who say books will soon be going out of style as electronic readers like Kindle become ever more popular. But every year in January and February literally tons of books come through OUUC's doors to be sorted, boxed and stored. And when the doors open at 9:00 am on sale day, book-lovers show up in ever-increasing numbers to shop for used book bargains. The best part is, everyone seems to go away happy.

Harmon Eaton
January 26, 2019