



OUTSIDE
THE *Vines*

INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND THE POTTING BENCH

A Sense of Place

By Ana Olvera

Kramerbooks & Afterwords Café is a staple in Washington, D.C., serving tourists, college students, politicians and more. Now with a change of ownership, Steve Salis, president and director of Kramerbooks, is tasked with taking the business to a new level while honoring its 40-year history.

"There's tremendous history and it's such an important place to so many people," Salis says. "It's a place where people can buy great books or have something to eat or drink. Seeing all that and recognizing that I can play a role in preserving this business and keeping it around for another 40 years is something that really moved me in this endeavor."

Established in 1976, Kramerbooks was the first bookstore/café business in D.C. at the time of its opening. On top of offering a wide selection of books, Kramerbooks offers a full menu and full-service bar.

Getting Your Bearings

The challenge of taking over any business, whether from a family member or coming in as a fresh face, can be a daunting task.

Salis has taken the time to get a good look at each aspect of the business in order to understand its function.

"Coming into this business there's so many moving parts and there's a lot of legacy things that have existed for a long period of time, and we're tackling so many different elements," Salis says. "There's been a lot of thinking, a lot of observing, a lot of dialogue — really about the different moving functions and how things are operated and why they're operated in that way."

In his approach Salis has focused on what he says are the "things that have made Kramerbooks such a special and unique environment for many tens of years, and making sure we preserve that while we layer in some progressive elements to sort of bring it up to what we call a modern standard of creating a high sensory experience for our consumer."

Creating the Atmosphere

Salis sees Kramerbooks as an experiential retail business and has identified its core competencies, which have been books, food and beverage, to create a sense of place for its consumers.

"Most things in retail are pretty transactional," Salis says. "So once you buy something, you

generally leave; whereas here you can actually buy a book and then make your way into the bar and have a cocktail or a croissant and a glass of wine depending on what part of the day it is.

"The food and beverage is so complementary to this business and in many cases lends itself to that sense of place that we are trying to create," Salis says.

Seeing food and beverage as critical to the business, Salis is focusing on getting the café side of the business "to speed so it meets the bookstore in a more synergized and curated way, so that experience can carry through every aspect, every square foot of the space."

An expansion into the adjacent building has allowed Kramerbooks to increase space for books by a few hundred square feet, and increase event capacity to up to 75 people for a seated event and up to 125 people for a standing-room only event. A coffee bar will also be added to the store, featuring proprietary branded Kramerbooks coffee.

"[Kramerbooks] has always been something more than selling a book," Salis says. "People bring their friends here, people have great memories here. It's a much more significant experience than a Barnes & Noble or Books-A-Million or any of these book retailers could ever create.

"You have to make reading content and the elements of what a book really is an integral part of one's life," Salis says. "The hope is that by building a high sensory experience, we'll be able to build something on a platform that will be large and spanning across multiple genres — not just in books but in people, different ages and different demographics. As a result of taking the general demographics strategy, we feel like we can really put our best foot forward."

Salis says Kramerbooks & Afterwords Café has been able to withstand the duration of time because its previous owners did what they felt was best for the brand and didn't become subject to industry traps.

"We're going to expand our horizons. But our core competencies are going to remain books, food and beverage," Salis says. "It's going to remain with a sense of place; it's going to remain with a sense of community; it's going to remain as a place of memories and creating experiences for our consumers so that we can become and continue to remain much more significant than just selling books." **LGR**

