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Ex-comic store owner shares his advice, take on a fragile industry

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It is true that sometimes you never miss something until it is gone. My local comic book store closed a few years ago and although there were rumours it would reopen at a different location, it never did.

Growing up and living in Toronto, I have been fortunate in the sense that if one store closes you can just take your fandom and business to another even if it means travelling a bit out of your way. Those living in smaller cities or towns here in Ontario aren't so lucky though.

What's even more troubling for the comic book industry as a whole is that more and more comic book stores are closing after being in business and serving their communities, sometimes for decades. To make matters worse, many of the surviving stores are struggling to get by every month.

Some blame the quality of the comics from industry and market leaders DC and Marvel. Some blame the fact that because many comic book series are restarted over and over, newer issues don't increase in value after their shelf life is over. Others blame too many special covers, too many first issues, too many books that just don't have a market waiting to buy and read them. Some blame the blatant politics which have crept into some American comic books over the last few years. Whatever the reason or reasons, manga sales are increasing while traditional comic books sales are not what they once were. There is no denying that being a comic book store owner has gotten harder not easier over the years.

After 20 years of sharing his passion for everything comics, former co-owner of Happy Harbor Comics, Jay Bardyla, is joining a long list of comic book store owners who have hung up their capes and tights.

For Bardyla, owning a comic book store has been both a dream come true and to be honest, a nightmare at times as well.



"As I often joke, nightmares are also dreams. The trick with turning your hobby into a business is that you can lose your passion for the hobby very quickly. Unless you have a business degree or a hankering for looking at numbers all day, running a business and working retail is not all it's cracked up to be. That said, spending every day with people who love the same thing you love is a pretty good gig regardless of where you are on the ladder in the biz," he told Culture of Gaming.

Bardyla and his partner Shawna decided to sell the store after discussing the possibility of leaving the business more and more over the last two years as their lease came up for renewal. They expected to be open for another five years but the pressures kept mounting and mounting.

"Last November, I took my first trip abroad. I'd never travelled before and I realized that there's a lot to see in the world and at 47, time was not my friend. It was just time for a change and we were both ready," said Bardyla who admitted he was "burning out" running the business.

Bardyla opened the store after starting his own subscription-only comic business in 1999. That business grew to a brick and mortar store just a year later. In its time, Happy Harbor won numerous local awards and industry awards including a Joe Shuster – Harry Kremer Award in 2007 for being the outstanding Canadian comic book retailer and multiple Eisner nominations for Retailer of the Year.

Although at times it has been a hardship managing the store, for Bardyla the good times far outweighed the bad. Winning the awards were proud moments but it was connecting with fans that meant so much more to him.

"Probably the best moments are when we meet someone who says...You came to my high school and now I'm in art school! We've done hundreds of school visits and it's amazing to think of those we've inspired. Actually, every person who has told us that they are grateful for Happy Harbor being around because it introduced them to comics, brought them back into comics, got their kid reading, got their kid storytelling, met their best friend, partner, spouse here, those are the best moments. They make the whole effort worthwhile," he said proudly.

One of the nagging issues for Bardyla was the deteriorating relationship between comic book store owners and the publishers themselves.

"The real problems have been in the past two years or so with publishers listening less and less to retailers and more to studio executives. It creates more work for the same money, which was frustrating," he stated.

According to Bardyla, when it comes to promoting the onus largely falls on store owners to carry the load, which they often can't due to staff, time and financial restraints.

"The industry is run by individually owned and operated stores, nearly all of which lack the resources to promote the comics medium outside of their own small, immediate community. The fact that publishers, big and small, do so little to promote the medium to a broader audience is the greatest setback," said Bardyla reflecting on the hardships.

Another factor handcuffing Bardyla was the lack of a rating system in the industry. Since some companies use their own system and others don't use one at all, there is no industry standard as there is with video games, movies and television shows. That can prevent retailers from expanding their market base.



"If you want to branch out into the wider audience that includes schools, libraries and families, you need that support tool as no shop can read or vet every book. It makes our job substantially harder than it needs to be," said Bardyla.

One of the reasons that has been cited for ailing health of the industry is the inability of comic book store owners to send back unsold copies for refunds or credits as many regular bookstores are able to do with some of their products like magazines. In that regard, Bardyla thinks the basic structure of the comic book business has to change.

"That 'inability' was something retailers fought to get. No returns meant bigger discounts. More risk equalled higher reward. However, that was decades ago and after the major collapse of comics in the late nineties, something should have changed. Publishing and creator rights changed with more profits, rights and freedoms but everything stayed the same for retailers. It became an increasingly imbalanced marketplace. I doubt returns would have helped, as an overall solution, because we would make less profit, the margins would have been much smaller. After a couple of years in business, you know what to order. The trick is getting your products out to an audience and getting them engaged and returning. That part we had been fairly successful at. It was just a lot of work," he said.

Even though he is leaving the business Bardyla will still be keeping an eye on the industry. With 20 years of experience, he offers this advice to store owners.

"Building communities is key for any independent business and any business that does that, coupled with some decent business sense, will have a good run and be sustainable. That's why Happy Harbor ended up getting purchased so quickly. The new owners could have opened a shop for far less than what they paid for the shop but they knew the value of the store to the community and that sort of reputation takes years to build. Starting strong with a committed, built-in audience is a good investment and as long as creators keep making interesting, beautiful stories that appeal to a variety of different audiences, there's no reason to think comics would go anywhere," he said.

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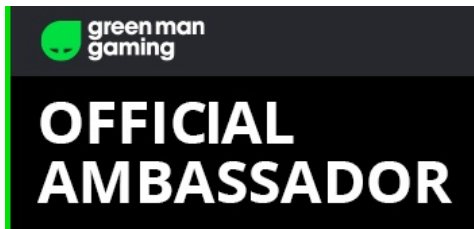
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