

Couth Buzzard Books: Seattle's community bookstore

When you first walk into Couth Buzzard Books, located on Greenwood Ave and 83rd, you are greeted by a large painting hanging on the wall. The top left corner features the owner Theo Dzielak's late daughter Ruby playing the drum. Ruby is joined by musicians, dancers, clowns, performers, and plenty of books. The painting displays a comfortable chaos of elements that blend into a lovely depiction of Couth Buzzard Books.

The Couth, a nickname used by its locals, doesn't quite fit into any one bucket: instead it is held up by a set of values built over the years by its dedicated regulars. Time seems to slow down as you walk through their bookshelves. You can hear the murmur of folks chatting around tables, the rhythm of a drum circle playing in the back room, or language conversation groups in French or Spanish.

I recently met with the owner Theo for coffee from his in-house cafe. We were joined by Theo's previous wife Kate Smith who remains very close to the Couth's culture and history. The history of the Couth dates back to 1992 when Theo and Kate made a long-standing commitment in their wedding vows to build community. This first began by hosting packed cabarets in their living room for five years. "The space in the back of the store is just an extension of that intimacy performers like so much," shared Kate.

During our chat, Kate discussed "the intangibles" or qualities of the bookstore that are hard to see but make the space special: community, a safe space, access to knowledge, and free speech. These are the pillars that hold up Couth Buzzard Books. The space is fluid and adapts to the needs of the community by providing programs that foster connection. It is also important to note that these programs are void of competition. A pillar of the Couth's culture is access to knowledge and art, meaning you can come as you are and explore something entirely new.

[The Couth's calendar](#) is packed with events that are open for anyone to join. Theo's love of music has sprouted into dozens of open jam sessions. Whether you are a seasoned musician, a beginner, or a spectator, you are welcome to come and explore. These jam sessions include everything from Brazilian Choro, Irish Celtic music, Jazz, percussion, Klezmer, and country blues. In addition to this, Theo invites local musicians and bands to schedule concerts that are held in their back room.

A particularly wonderful event hosted at the Couth is their weekly open mic night on Wednesdays at 7pm. This free event showcases the massive range of talent in our community. The open mic event is a space for poetry, songs, comedy, theater, and much more. If there is something you want to share at open mic nights, you are welcome to.

When Theo and Kate's daughter Ruby was diagnosed with cancer, she chose to share this experience with the community at the Couth. Ruby didn't realize what a gift this act of sharing was to so many people. She was raised in a theater community, with the values of sharing art and vulnerabilities. The response following was an outpouring of support and connection through shared experiences. Not only did this lead to fundraising for Ruby, but it also deepened the community as more people became vulnerable and shared with one another, finding a slice of solace in this exchange with friends.

Theo and Kate shared this story to explain what "community" and "safe spaces" mean to the Couth's culture. They believe in the need for people to have a place they can authentically connect with others. The philosophy behind this is simple: if you are respectful and kind, you are welcome here. The Couth also has an all-ages policy which is rooted in the belief that all generations have the same basic needs and should have the same access to knowledge and art.

When the store faced the harsh reality of closing its doors on April 3rd of this year, Theo had begun to accept the end until the true intention of the space revealed itself. Doug Plummer, a musician and a regular at the Couth Buzzard's jam sessions, set up a Go Fund Me site within 2 days of the news going public. Within one night it had raised \$15,000. Within two weeks, it had sky rocketed to \$60,000 from 600 donors. The community had decidedly come forward to save the Couth Buzzard.

The Friends of the Couth Buzzard Committee was immediately formed, consisting of Doug, a Phinney Neighbourhood Association representative, a seasoned business consultant, a member of "Friends of the Couth," Theo, and Kate. The steering committee meets weekly to discuss options to build a more sustainable future plan for the Couth to keep their doors open. They are on track to have this plan solidified by the end of this calendar year.

If you walk into the store following this event you can feel a new energy vibrating through its bookshelves. While the Couth always had a dedicated community, it now has a larger sense of urgency to protect what has become many people's second home. The necessity for collective spaces, where people can meet, create, and explore has become a priority for our city.

For the last 14 years since Theo bought the store he has stayed true to the values of providing a safe and kind space, where access to knowledge through books is always available. While Couth Buzzard Books may be embarking on a new journey, its purpose remains concrete. This is the place you come to deepen your connection to yourself and others. Whether that is through browsing their bookshelves, trying your hand at a new instrument, or opening yourself up to performance. This space is dedicated to nourishing community and enriching lives through books and art.

If you would like to be notified and stay in the loop as plans for the Buzzard move forward, please register your email address [here](#).