

Simone Wallace, left, co-owner of Sisterhood Bookstore, and **Sue Otto**, an employee, stand outside of the bookstore, which is slated to close due to financial troubles.

After 26 years in Westwood, bookstore may face closure

BUSINESS: Owners hope to raise money, reopen or move to new location

By Christine Byrd
Daily Bruin Contributor

Each year, some 2,500 students make the walk or take the bus ride to 1351 Westwood Blvd. to buy texts and support a struggling independent book store.

But the trip is not repeated by enough students, parking is too scarce, and the looming chain store Border's Books and Music across the street casts too great a shadow over Sisterhood Bookstore.

At the end of July, owners Simone and Adele Wallace plan to close Sisterhood's doors after 26 years.

"From our peak year of 1992, we've gone down about 50 percent," Adele Wallace said.

For many years, UCLA professors—mostly in the women's studies and English departments—have ordered their textbooks through Sisterhood to support the store.

English professor Karen Rowe regularly orders her required reading through Sisterhood for her courses on women writers.

"They can go and browse and see the richness of what's written," she said. "They can hear visiting poets and writers in a setting that's inviting and relaxed."

Rowe added that she encourages

students to go to Sisterhood throughout the year, not just for course requirements.

"Our regular sales have declined but we've kept going by our textbook sales and wonderful support from UCLA professors," Wallace said.

"For a women's studies class, you should be required to come into a women's bookstore as part of the experience," she added.

Professors concerned with the status of independent bookstores know selling textbooks isn't their purpose, but that it helps keep owners in business.

"When people go to a bookstore, they expect coffee now."

Adele Wallace
Co-owner of Sisterhood
Bookstore

But many students said it's more convenient to get their books on campus at the UCLA Store in Ackerman Union.

"In early years, before it got to be an issue for bigger publishers, only small publishers printed the kind of books needed for a women's studies course, and a small bookstore could get them," said Mary Margaret

Smith, assistant to the chair of the women's studies department and the person who coordinates with professors ordering textbooks.

Yet, if not for independent bookstores which deal with customers and small publishers personally, many once-unknown female writers such as Barbara Kingsolver, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Rebecca Wells might still be obscure, the owners said.

Those writers and others got their start at stores like Sisterhood and catapulted to the bestseller lists. Now, major book chains cash in on their popularity.

"The books that get the best publicity, they discount, and we can't compete with that," said Wallace.

While the Wallaces admit that they cannot beat chains' bargain prices, they said small, independent stores still provide unmatched, one-on-one service and expertise.

"Over there, they're just going to tell you the author and point you in the right direction," Adele said.

Changes in the book industry encompass more than just being cheaper and bigger.

"People want a place to hang out," Wallace said. "When people go to a bookstore, they expect coffee now."

The Wallaces are accepting donations for the store, and are looking for investors or buyers to keep the store open. Sisterhood will need about \$200,000 to stay open.

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SISTERHOOD

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Comedian Emily Levine will perform at a fundraiser for Sisterhood on May 17 at Tiffany Theater in West Hollywood.

The Wallaces are hoping that the proceeds might enable the store to relocate to a larger site with more parking and a higher profile. And they vow to expand their public relations efforts if they get a second chance.

Paula Silva, a third-year Chicano studies student who works at the store, emphasized Sisterhood's need to reach out to the community.

"There are young women all over the city who have no idea this place for women even exists. It's such a precious and important place and if it stays open, the community needs to be a major part of that," Silva said.

Students new to the area would not know the store existed if it were not for textbooks, the owners said. Even so, students are not repeat customers as frequently as they used to be.

"I don't know if it's just lack of consciousness or why they aren't making the effort to support independent bookstores," said employee Hiyas Magilligan, a fourth-year English and women's studies student. "It's a very sad thing."

End of story

AFTER YEARS OF DWINDLING SALES, SISTERHOOD SET TO CLOSE ITS DOORS

By Sergei Pianella

"You guys can't close," pleads one loyal customer as she approaches the cash register, a paperback novel in one hand and a credit card in the other.

Standing nearby, Simone Wallace, co-owner of Sisterhood Bookstore in Westwood, musters a smile at this heartfelt show of support but it fades quickly. She knows that even if all the customers at Borders Books and Music across the street could be coaxed away from their lattes and the glitz to scuff her little corner shop's floorboards instead, the fate of Southern California's only feminist bookstore would still be sealed.

"Our loyal fan base has always remained, but we need more than that," says Wallace, who started the business with two partners 27 years ago as a place devoted solely to women's issues, a place that's "not interested in taking both sides of a certain issue."

Unless Sisterhood finds a benefactor, or gets a major cash infusion — one that would allow the store to relocate to a larger site with parking as well as funding for a public relations program — the store will be shuttered for good by July 31.

"We can't compete, we can't offer the discounts, we can't afford to order more and more books," says Simone Wallace, referring to the growth of monster chain stores and Internet shopping opportunities. "They can easily get the books that we don't have."

Although Borders lurks on the opposite side of Westwood Boulevard like Charybdis, sucking customers through its sparkling glass doors or from elevator shafts connected to the multi-level underground parking garage, Wallace steers away from assigning it all the blame. But

sales, which peaked at Sisterhood in the late 1980s, only to have gone down by 50 percent in the last several years, might suggest otherwise.

"The reasons are many and not necessarily all bad," maintains Wallace. "In the '70s and '80s, if people were looking for alternative items or gay issues they had to go to alternative bookstores, usually out-of-the-way places, but that's not the case anymore. They've entered the mainstream and become accepted lifestyle choices so people don't feel the need to come here — there are websites and even the larger chains have women's studies sections."

Sisterhood Bookstore has tried to keep up with the changing times. The partners continued to have book signings and poetry readings, started a multi-media section, catered to UCLA students with a thriving textbook department and dedicated a back room to informing customers of upcoming events. A website was established three years ago.

"We're trying to be competitive in the new online marketplace," says employee Sue Otto. "But the website hasn't generated a lot of business."

Indeed, if it wasn't for the students, the bookstore might have gone under a long time ago. For the past 10 years, between 40 and 60 instructors have sent their students across Wilshire Boulevard to buy the required books, infusing Sisterhood with much-needed cash every quarter.

Unfortunately, the profit margins on textbook sales aren't very high. Wallace calls it a "false infusion."

"The publishers give smaller discounts if they know the books are for classroom adoption," she says. "About 25 percent of them have to be returned, contributing to huge shipping costs. And besides, it's

not really who we are — we want to be a dynamic bookstore with regular sales."

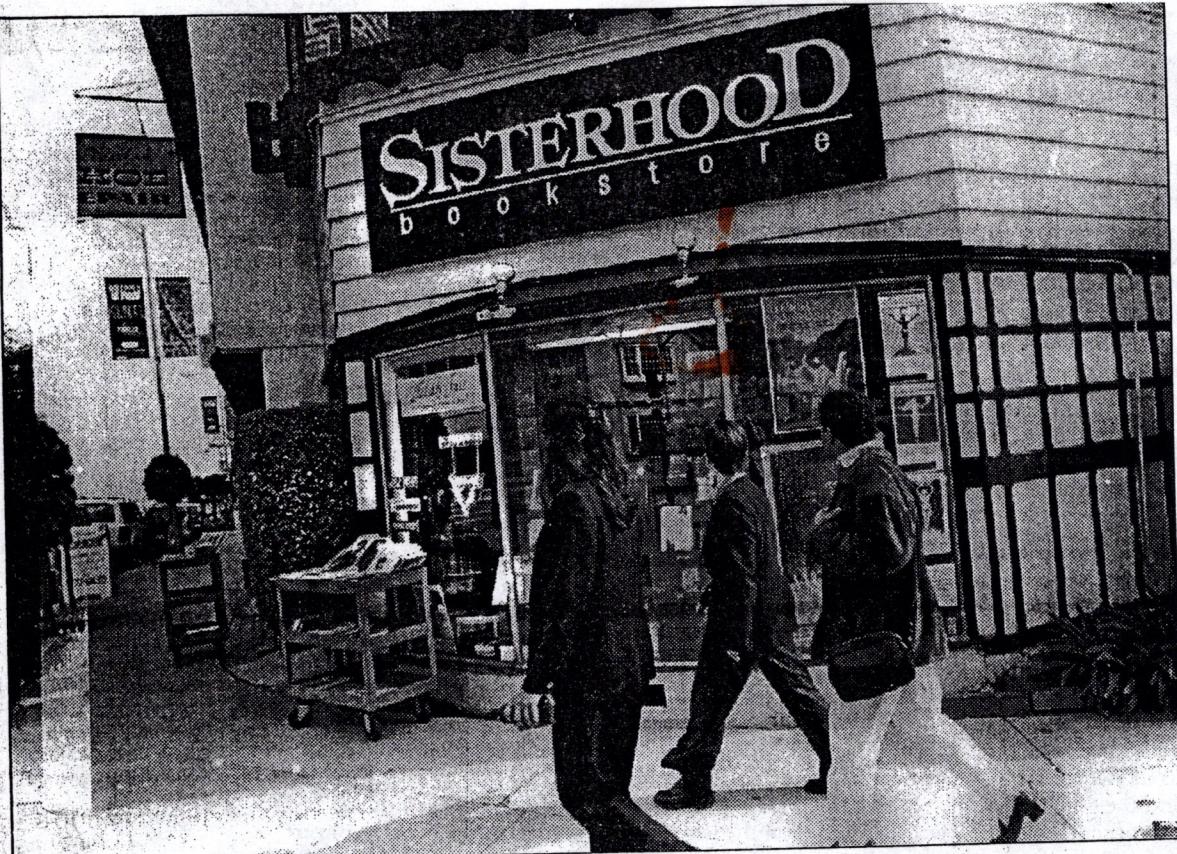
The loyal customers are coming out for a show of support. The pages of a journal lying by the cash register is filled with scripted ideas and words of encouragement.

Kevin Green suggested the following strategy: "Try a cooperative. Have 100 customers buy \$100 shares and raise \$10,000. The community will then have to support the store."

Another loyal fan wrote: "Don't close, make us all listen."

To gather even more momentum, a benefit concert by comedian Emily Levine has been scheduled for May 17 at 7:30 p.m. at the Tiffany Theater in West Hollywood. The suggested minimum donation is \$25 in advance, \$35 at the door.

Although Wallace would dearly love to stay involved in the book business, the opti-



Unless Sisterhood Bookstore is the recipient of a major infusion of capital or the owners get an offer for a better space somewhere else, the feminist bookstore will cease to exist at the end of July.

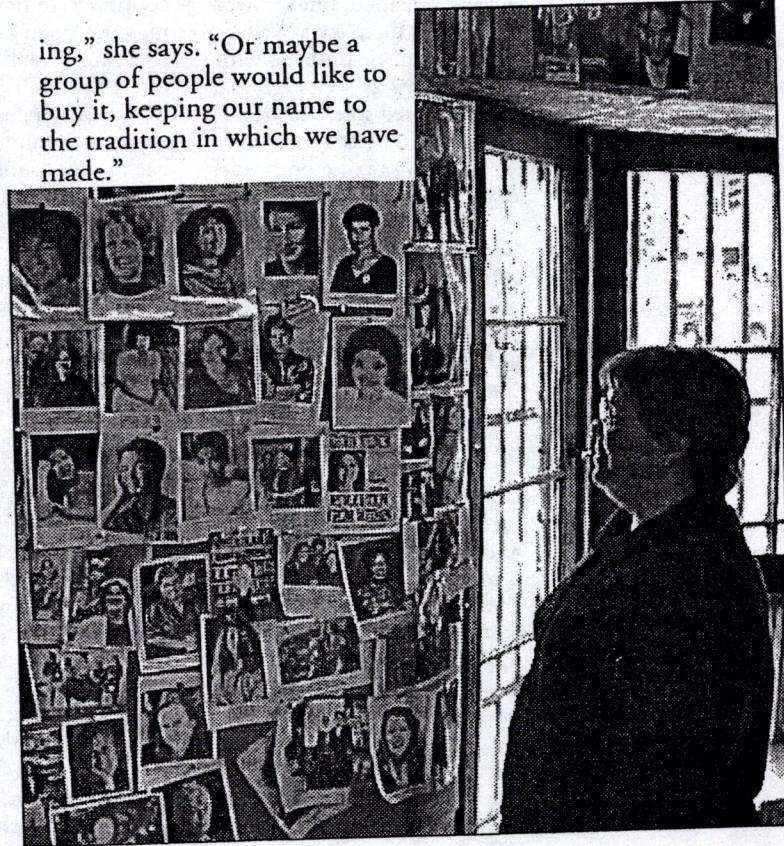
mism has been slowly draining as she's had to fall back on her teaching qualifications to make ends meet. She's been "in the process of letting go for the last

few years." And the best-case scenario?

"I would love to have the offer of a place — where we could have espresso and park-

ing," she says. "Or maybe a group of people would like to buy it, keeping our name to the tradition in which we have made."

Photo by Gary McCarthy



Sue Otto, an employee at Sisterhood Bookstore, inspects the writers wall. After 27 years in Westwood, the corner shop is preparing to close down at the end of July.