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New business instills the love of books in local children

By Diane Claytor



Moraga's Trudy Deutz shows off the books and special packing that Elephant Book Club members will receive. Photo provided

It's one of the best antidotes to a hectic day spent rushing from one activity to the next, one place to another: cuddling on the sofa or snuggling in bed with your freshly bathed, clean-smelling toddler beside you, reading his or her favorite story (even if it is for the 25th time). These are the moments that reinforce that very special bond, create wonderful memories and often elicit meaningful conversations. And no matter how easy or convenient an e-reader may be, for a child especially, it doesn't compare to holding a book, turning a page, feeling the furry bunny or soft kitten that's the star of the story.

We all know bookstores are, unfortunately, disappearing, making it more difficult to find that perfect book for the children in our lives. That's what Moraga's Trudy Deutz realized last year when looking for a gift for a friend's 5-year-old. Wanting to purchase a book

but not knowing what books the recipient may already have, Deutz started thinking about the concept of a kids' book club, finding new, undiscovered authors and offering beautiful, vibrant hard-covered age-appropriate books.

Deutz, who has more than 20 years of consumer product, entertainment and digital media experience, contacted a former colleague, Stephen Murray, like Deutz, an avid reader, who now lives in London. The two reminisced about the books they read as children, their memories of childhood visits to the library and checking out books, using the old library check-out card included in every book. They talked about the current retro trend where, as Deutz said, "everything is new again" and the idea of creating a book club for the younger set. Deutz and Murray did their due diligence, researching what the experts say about the importance of reading. Almost all agree that books stimulate imagination and play, curiosity and discussion. FirstfiveCalifornia.com reports that books are one of the most effective learning tools for children, starting from infancy. "Studies have shown that encouraging a child's comments and responses during story time can actually accelerate a 2-year-old's language development by up to nine months," the website states.

Valerie Friedholm, another friend with marketing, sales and

financial experience, joined the group and, after more research and many conversations and virtual meetings, the three book lovers brought to life The Elephant Book Club, geared to children from infants to 6-year-olds. (The name, according to Deutz, came to them because elephants are such gentle, sweet animals with great memories and said to be devoted to their offspring.) "We all believe that an early introduction to books played a critical role in our own development by encouraging curiosity, love of learning and, perhaps most of all, imagination," the co-founders state on their website. Their goal is to help today's young families make that same discovery.

The co-founders have built relationships with several publishers who provide books to review. Friedholm, who lives on the East Coast, meets with the publishers to personally source the books and make sure each one meets the high standards wanted for the Elephant Book Club members. "We're looking for quality books we think parents will want to read and kids will want to keep," Deutz explained.

Each month, club members in the 0-2 year age range receive three high-quality colorful and stimulating board books; 2- to 6-year-olds receive two exceptionally written and designed hard-covered picture books. In addition to the premium books sent, each delivery includes reading tips and a set of fun activities designed to make family reading even more meaningful and engaging. Beautifully crafted bookplates are sent for the younger children while the older ones receive custom-designed library cards. Deutz explained that toddlers can scribble something on the bookplate or a preschooler can write the name of the person who read him or her the book for the very first time on the library card. "These are simple ways to make a library of personalized memories," she noted.

As Deutz continued, "We're excited to offer these new, beautiful books and having them mean something to both parents and children. They can bond over the books and then save them, knowing the kids have a real – not digital – library they can cherish and some day pass on to their kids."

For more information or to subscribe and receive books the children in your life will want to read, share and keep, go to elephant-books.com.



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A good match for the holidays: Hollie's Homegrown and Hofssi Chocolates at Cine Cuvée

By Sophie Braccini

At a recent Lamorinda Business Women group meeting, Hollie Lucas-Alcalay participated in a panel discussion about partnerships. For the Moraga entrepreneur who grows and sells her herbs and derivative concoctions, it was a topic she understands well; she recently created a common boutique with Lamorinda chocolatier sisters Susan Hofmeister and Linda Rossi of Hofssi Chocolates in Orinda's downtown Cine Cuvée.

The three women are all mothers of young children, living in Moraga or Orinda and driven by a similar desire to create high quality gourmet products for a demanding market. Lucas-Alcalay has been in business for seven years, growing all kinds of herbs in her garden, drying and packaging them, creating teas, culinary salts, olive oils and herb infused bath and body products that she sells herself in farmers' markets

or online.

Hofmeister and Rossi create their chocolates through Cottage Food Operator licenses in their homes. Their range of products include gourmet caramels, toffees, mint meltaways, chocolate covered almonds and the signature gianduja – an Italian concoction mixing chocolate and ground roasted hazelnuts or almonds.

The three women rubbed shoulders at different events, such as the Hacienda de las Flores Holiday Fair, and Lucas-Alcalay noticed that the chocolatiers were business women with the same ethics: looking for organic, flawless production, and delivering what had been promised on the terms that were agreed upon.

The trio also explains that they are in the same economic bracket with similar constraints: their volumes are still small, so selling wholesale does not pencil out.

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