

Bookstore crisis has fairytale ending

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Clarey Rudd, a longtime independent bookseller in Ventura, received a gift of more than \$100,000* to pay his debt after surgery. He was uninsured when he underwent surgery for cancer.

Photo by [Joseph A. Garcia](#), *Ventura County Star*

This is a story of a family given something amazing they never sought from a donor they had no idea was out there.

Clarey Rudd knows a lot of stories, considering he has bought and sold vast numbers of books for decades through the four-store operation he runs out of the Abednego Book Shoppe on Main Street in midtown Ventura.

This tale of good fortune has befallen him recently, but the story started 20 years ago when Rudd's singing voice began to crack. He was diagnosed with a rare tumor in his larynx. Surgery to remove the malignancy proved successful, although doctors never did tune up Rudd's pipes so his crooning sounded like Barry Manilow's, as he had asked them to do.

In the years that followed, this husband and father of three daughters racked up 80-plus-hour work weeks in his bookstores. The son of booksellers, Rudd knew the mom-and-pop shops of his boyhood were fighting for their lives as the big chains such as Barnes & Noble and Borders moved in.

Despite the competition, Rudd has given away to the community an estimated 1.5 million surplus books he took in but never included in his stores' inventory. Rudd's business has hung on, although with too little profit for him to buy health insurance. So when he developed shortness of breath a few years ago, he didn't see the doctor.

In June 2012, just as he was opening a new store in Malibu, he called his wife, Debby, to tell her he couldn't breathe. "With each breath, I was fighting for life," Rudd said. Tests revealed a calcified tumor squeezed his windpipe to the width of a wire. Only a tracheotomy could save his life. That meant removing his voice box, which would render him unable to speak.

“We believe God takes care of us,” said Debby, Clarey’s wife of 33 years. “If it was his time to go, Clarey was OK with it, but I wasn’t so much.” Rudd agreed to the surgery. He now draws breath through an opening in his neck covered with a patch.

The operation removed none of his work ethic, however. Within days of getting out of the hospital, he was back on the job. But the business had to change. Because he could no longer answer the phone or talk to customers, he couldn’t work the stores by himself and had to hire more help. Debby had to take on more of the business operations. Although her background was in respiratory rehabilitation, which helped immensely with Clarey’s medical issues, she felt out of place as a retailer. Then the phone calls started coming in from the medical providers. The bills for the surgery amounted to around \$120,000. The Rudds had paid about \$5,000 toward that sum. Between emptying a warehouse to stock a new location in Oxnard and a computer crash that crippled the business for days and cost an estimated \$20,000, Debby says she was unable to complete the paperwork to get state aid to pay the medical expenses.

Then the email came in. A representative of Book Industry Charitable Foundation in Michigan spotted a story about Rudd’s Malibu outlet and his surgery that had come out of publicity he received in this newspaper and the Los Angeles Times. The woman explained the fund originally had been set up by employees of Borders to help with co-workers’ emergencies. When Borders went under in 2011, the foundation broadened its mission to serve as a safety net for all booksellers. Somewhat skeptical, Rudd asked an employee — the former manager of shuttered Borders Oxnard store — if he had heard of such a foundation. The employee confirmed he paid into it when he worked for the chain.

“Clary and Debby’s business was in jeopardy,” said Pam French, foundation executive director. “This medical debt affected the Rudds and their employees.”

The foundation hired a service to negotiate the medical bills, and the collection calls soon stopped, to the Rudds’ eternal gratitude.

The couple received another email in October. This one made them cry. It showed all their bills, and in every case, the balance was zero. All \$115,000 of their debt disappeared.

Before this, the average grant from the foundation to an individual totaled \$2,200, French told me. *

Neither this generosity nor the surgery left Rudd completely speechless. Since his surgery, he has taught himself how to be heard by forcing air from his stomach up his throat. “It’s kind of a little miracle,” I distinctly heard him say about the gift that came out of nowhere. And then he added, “It’s the miracle on Main Street.”

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* The Book Industry Charitable Foundation contracted with a medical mediation service to help reduce the amount of the Rudds’ bills. The Binc Foundation did not give a grant directly to the Rudds.