

Against All Odds

By Kristopher Fortin for Café Media, Nov. 6, 2009

Fires are raging nearby the mixed-income and ethnically diverse neighborhood of Eagle Rock northeast of downtown Los Angeles. Moisture clings to the ice-cold lemonade as it sits in the art gallery in Imix Bookstore. Three Occidental College students ask at the front counter if the store has plays; they do not, but the students serve themselves some lemonade before they go outside into the heat and smoke.

The air conditioner is on full blast in the multicolored store with yellow walls, lime green floor and Dia de los Muertos figurines on top of bookshelves, peering over in their decorated dresses, their black mouths ajar.

It takes more than a fire to stop the bookstore from keeping its doors open. But with the nationwide recession hitting business of all sizes, Elisa Garcia, founder and owner of Imix Bookstore, is fighting to keep alive her versatile business, known for its unique book titles, music, art and community offerings. "We are still here because people love us," Garcia says.

After years of working in independent bookstores around Los Angeles, Garcia opened the first incarnation of Imix in an indoor shopping center in downtown Los Angeles called Mercado La Paloma. Imix budded next to a majority of Latino food, clothing, and craft shops. The bookstore only had three bookshelves of books back then.

Since she wanted the bookstore to be closer to her Cypress Park home, she used her \$5,000 tax return to relocate to an Eagle Rock shop on the corner of Colorado and Eagle Rock boulevards eight years ago this fall. Her credit was in shambles

after she received her bachelor's degree at UCLA, so she wasn't able to borrow money for her business. From its inception, Imix has run solely on the profits generated from book sales, and the revenue generated at art shows.

Ninety percent of the products used to be books. Garcia eventually started to sell stationery, wallets, jewelry, shirts, and purses mostly made by local artists. Non-book products now make up 40 percent of the items in the store, Garcia says.

Being a step ahead and being more unique than larger retail bookstores has been a key to the store's success.

When Hugo Chavez gave Barack Obama "Open Veins of Latin America" by Eduardo Galeano earlier this year, the book sold out in an instant. The book has been in stock for years prior. Widely popular novels like Junot Diaz's Pulitzer Prize winning novel "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" is at the store, but even more obscure earlier works like Diaz's "Negocios" can also be found.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez titles are among the most popular. "He pays my rent consistently," Garcia says.

Customers bring their families and Garcia makes it a point to remember parent's and children's names. Amy Koss, a children's book author, said Garcia knows her family, and they come on their own to shop at the store often. "My daughter spends money here like a drunken sailor," Koss says.

"We just talk to people, have fun, and hopefully they buy something at the end of the conversation," Garcia says.

Garcia's magnetism, choice for the color of the floors and walls, and her choice of books is all a reflection of how much of herself is invested into the bookstore,

including the work she puts into the art gallery. A lot of the artists she invites are friends or do work she likes. Some exhibits are put together within a matter of days, but Garcia keeps things calm by treating the artists like they are in her home. Photographer Amanda Lopez, 27, who had her first photography exhibition at Imix, remembers Elisa buying Lopez a Cuban sandwich and a *yerba mate* soda while Lopez had one day to arrange her photos in the art gallery.

Gabriel Romo, an artist from Berkeley, Calif., had his first solo show at Imix Bookstore. Romo returned for a second show with members from the Trust Your Struggle artist collective and painted murals that covered the entire gallery space in just three days.

“My view of (Los Angeles) changed because of Imix,” Romo says. “Seeing the culture that existed down there because of Imix, it really opened my eyes.”