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Elemental Histories

Lafayette publisher crafts personalized books for memoirists, gift-givers

By Quentin Young
Colorado Hometown Newspapers

The equipment Lissa Ann Forbes uses in her home publishing operation is simple enough.

There is, of course, the computer, for layout and design.

And, there's a small device she uses to bind books by hand.

But the rewards her customers derive from her work can be profound.

She recently completed a series of memoirs for customers who are retirement community residents.

The memoirs contained recollections of and photos from throughout the subjects' lives.

One woman gave copies of her memoir to family members, and they told the woman the books were more meaningful than anything she could have given them.

This is just what Forbes wants to hear.

"I'm passionate about making books and helping people tell their stories," she said.

Forbes has turned her passion into a business, called The Elemental Press, which she runs out of her Lafayette home.

Memoirs and one-of-a-kind tribute books such as those that might be given at a stu-

dent's graduation or a worker's retirement are the core of Forbes' business.

But this wasn't always the case.

It was only through trial and error that Forbes developed a product line to which customers responded.

She was inspired to create her first book in the wake of the 1999 Columbine High School tragedy.

Someone established a Web site to which people from around the world contributed thoughts and prayers dedicated to those touched by the shootings. Forbes was one of the contributors.

She learned that the site's founder was looking for someone to publish the submissions sent to the site.

Forbes said to herself: "Yes, yes, I want to do it."

What resulted was a spiral-bound, hardcover book called "Columbine High School Memorial Book."

"It was really a challenge getting those out," Forbes said.

The project was not a business enterprise — most of the copies of the book were meant for the families of those killed in the shooting. "It was just something that came from the heart."

Forbes' next publishing effort involved a novel a friend was writing.

This project also was not in-

tended as a money-maker.

But it represented a major step forward in Forbes' developing craft.

She began to research book-binding techniques and discovered Chet Novicki, a man from Hawaii who made manual presses.

Forbes bought from Novicki her own manual presses and went into business.

Some of her first retail products were journals.

On the covers of the journals were photos Forbes had taken herself.

Six major bookstores in metro Denver, including the Tattered Cover, bought the journals, and they sold for \$12.

But the venture proved ill-fated.

"They flopped," Forbes said. "Nobody bought them."

Next, she tried selling journals that included personalized photos on the cover and dedications inside.

But it was an idea she hit upon when her son was about to graduate from high school that helped propel The Elemental Press in its current direction.

Forbes had the idea to publish her son's "story" and present the book to him as a graduation gift.

She shared this idea with a co-worker, who decided to order a book for his own son's graduation.



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Lissa Ann Forbes sits among examples of her work. She began binding books by hand several years ago when she created a tribute book on the Columbine High School tragedy.

In a testimonial, the student's father said: "Lissa's high level of professionalism and quality work on layout, flow and captions, contributed to leaving my son in silence for hours as he pored through the pages of his personalized graduation book."

As with the memoirs she produces, Forbes' tribute books comprise photos from throughout the subjects' life and text submitted by family members and friends. Her layout designs are simple and clear, and the pages are pleasingly and lightly shaded in

one of four tones, such as yellow or gray.

It takes her about a week to put together one of the books.

The books, Forbes believes, are a novel idea, and customers have received them well.

"The response I get is: 'I've never seen anything like this,'" Forbes said.

The success of Forbes' memoirs and tribute books has led to her business slogan "Publishing History, One Life at a Time."

Forbes recently began giving seminars at retirement

communities in which she teaches participants the art of memoir writing.

She said she'd eventually like to divide her time between teaching and producing her books.

This could allow her to promote her services and, more importantly, avoid too much time in front of the computer.

"I need to be around people," Forbes said.

For more information, call 303-926-1890 or visit TheElementalPress.com.