

Chapter Twenty-two

Trading Post Events

“Events draw people and help your business.”



ABOUT FOUR TO SIX MONTHS after we opened we started making major changes. Our initial theme was a plain warehouse outlet with minimal selection of goods and mountains of products stacked high. Our new concept would be a colorful trading-post atmosphere with Spanish guitar music, great displays and more variation of merchandise.

Once we decided on that direction, changes came very fast. We removed the partition down the middle and the registration desk at the front door. The Oriental & Persian rug inventory doubled. We put in ten showcases full of turquoise and silver jewelry. Those cases were so successful that we kept adding more until we finally had over fifty showcases of jewelry. We moved the three-thousand-square-foot central office from the front of the building to the back and filled the front space with beautiful pottery, pewter, artifacts and antiques from Mexico. We added new products like mounted horns, cow and buffalo skulls, more styles of baskets, rattlesnake products, a new line of high-end saddles and a tack department, more leather goods of all kinds, glassware and more home

decor. I dramatically increased the TV, radio, newspaper and magazine advertising. And of course, we bought more billboards (we're up to about fifty). This was a big expense, but slowly it began to pay off. In a matter of a few short months we transformed the World Headquarters into a "one-acre shopping ADVENTURE."

Another thing that worked well for us was various events and promotions. One of the first events we tried was a Winter Open House that we invited everyone we could think of to. Plus we did some major advertising. There was live music, food, refreshments, some special arts and crafts demonstrations and more.

The event was a mild success. Our theory was to just get as much traffic in as possible and hope that word would spread about the new look of El Paso Saddleblanket Company.

The next notable event was what we called the Media Appreciation Fiesta. We invited everyone in the El Paso print, TV and radio media for a big barbecue and awards presentation. We had a live weather broadcast from the store. Cara Wells (Luc's wife) made the presentations and Bill Blazeik of The Convention and Visitors Bureau was the emcee. We gave out ten awards; the media folks loved it and really enjoyed socializing with each other. We had about three hundred people turn out. The event was a huge success so we decided we definitely needed more big events.

The biggest event we have ever had—probably the biggest event we will ever have—was the Don Haskins book signing in June of 2006.

In 1966 Coach Don Haskins of Texas Western College (now the University of Texas El Paso) had won the prestigious NCAA Basketball Tournament with a starting line up of five African-American players. Haskins coached at UTEP for the next thirty-eight years despite many good offers to coach elsewhere. He had a phenomenal winning record and is one of the most revered and popular personalities in the entire Southwest.

A book by Haskins and nationally known sportswriter Dan Wetzel called *Glory Road* was later made into a movie starring Josh Lucas. The movie won an ESPY award in 2006, which in sports movies is the same as an Oscar at the Academy Awards.

Coach Haskins is a very modest person who has helped many people go on to greater things. For years he would collect and gather food to distribute to needy people in Mexico and El Paso. I didn't follow sports much and never met Coach Haskins until one particularly cold day when he came to me wanting to buy blankets to distribute along with his food baskets. Over his objection, I ended up donating some blankets to the cause. He was grateful and we became good friends. He came to Hillsboro a lot.

We decided to do a book signing with Coach Haskins at El Paso Saddleblanket in June of 2006. He had already had several successful signings at Barnes & Noble and at the UTEP book store in January so he didn't think he would have much of a turnout for another book signing. But then the movie won the ESPY award and the studio released the movie on DVD in May. The coach had his own clothing line and speaking engagements around the country. Coach Haskins and the 1966 team were even invited to the White House for a special screening with President Bush and the First Lady. There was a lot of hype nationwide at the time.

I wanted to do this book signing and get maximum exposure. So we decided that we would sell the newly released *Glory Road* DVD as well as the book for Haskins to sign. He would also autograph sports memorabilia, clothing articles, posters, basketballs and anything else for a \$5 fee to be donated to charity.

Remembering the recent success of our Media Appreciation Awards, I invited all the media to a press release party & barbecue to announce the upcoming book signing on the following Saturday. All four major TV network stations showed up, as well as two from Juárez and a host of radio stations and print press, including the local gay newspaper. We had the announcement on every sports news broadcast in town that Wednesday night.

AT 8:30 A.M. on Saturday June 10, 2006—the day of the scheduled 11 A.M. book signing—I got a call from my general manager Luc Wells. He called from his cell phone on the way to open up saying there were

about twenty cars already in our parking lot. Something told me that this was not going to be an ordinary day.

By the time Coach Haskins and co-author Dan Wetzel arrived, there were fifteen hundred people in the store, our three-acre parking lot was full and no parking places could be found within a block of the El Paso Saddleblanket World Headquarters. The press showed up in full force. The line to buy books and numbered autograph tickets snaked all around the inside of the store. Bonnie and I served cold water to the hundreds of people in line but we knew that there was no way we could finish by 4 P.M. Jeff Limberg, a friend and local sports personality, went around and announced that we would have to continue the book signing the next Saturday because we had sold six hundred more autograph tickets that the Coach could sign. On the 6 and 10 P.M. news that night every TV station showed the huge lines at Saddleblanket with short clips of Haskins signing books. The leading sports story in the *El Paso Times* and the *Las Cruces Sun-News* that Sunday was about the phenomenal book signing.

The next Saturday was almost as busy but we were better prepared. Again, we oversold the books, DVDs and autograph tickets by about three hundred this time. Again, Jeff went around and made the announcement that we would be going into double overtime for the third Saturday in a row. Again, great 6 and 10 P.M. TV news coverage and leading newspaper sports stories on Sunday.

The last Saturday was busy, but without the craziness of the first two. Hey, we were getting to be old hands at this now.

Coach signed steadily all day and we wound up finishing the last autograph at 4:30. We broke out the tequila while Coach sent Beto Fournier, his assistant (and crony), out to his pick-up to get his coyote and duck callers. Then the legendary seventy-six-year-old coach proceeded to demonstrate the fine art of duck calling for the next three hours.

At this time, I was starting to think to myself, "There could be some future opportunities to this book signing business."

I HAD MET Kinky Friedman a few months earlier, at about the time he announced he was going to run for governor of Texas. Kinky is an iconic Texas musician and multi-book writer. He was part of the 1970s outlaw country music movement here in Texas when he, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and others merged the hippies and cowboys into a sort of Texas-style country-western/rock and roll sound.

A few months after we met his El Paso campaign manager notified me about Kinky's planned fundraiser at the Camino Real Hotel on Sunday. Remembering the recent success of the Haskins event, I suggested a book signing at the World Headquarters the Monday after the fundraiser. It was short notice and on a Monday besides, but we were confident we could have a good turn out. The TV reporters showed up, Kinky lit up a cigar inside the store live on a Channel 7 interview and the phones went wacko. The fundraiser at the Camino Real Hotel drew thirty-five people; the Kinky Friedman book signing at El Paso Saddleblanket World Headquarters drew over four hundred. We were happy, and he was very, very happy.

I'll never forget what his departing words to me were: "Dusty, when I get to be governor...you're on Easy Street." And with that, my last words to him were, "Kinky, you just got my vote!" He came in a distant fourth place in the Texas governor's race, but my guess is that his book sales and music business went up. (I know for sure, the saddleblanket business went up.)

"Hmmm...I think I like book signings..."

IN JULY, we teamed up with Adair Margo, a very successful local gallery owner, to plan the Great Southwest Book Fair and Sale which we held at El Paso Saddleblanket World Headquarters on September 16, 2006. Adair is well connected and she also happens to be one of First Lady Laura Bush's closest friends, and the Chairman of the President's Council on the Arts and the Humanities. Thanks to Adair and husband Dee Margo—Texas state senator candidate at the time—we got an official proclamation from the President and First Lady.

We managed to bring Senator Peggy Rosson out of retirement to help, as well as young socialite Asia Zaragoza. Channel 9 KTSM-TV, *El Paso Inc.* magazine, the *El Paso Times*, the El Paso Writers Guild, Mountain Dreams Publishing, the El Paso Public Library, Texas Western Press and many others also came aboard.

We had about forty tables of authors signing their books, a media row with major publications, book publishers, and live TV coverage throughout the day. There were auctions, raffles, book review lectures, Tigua Indian Dancers, Mexican mariachis, a pottery-making demonstration by former Tigua Indian Governor Albert Alvidrez, and Saint Vincent de Paul had a huge used book sale in the front parking lot. The weather was beautiful and the turnout was HUGE.

The Great Southwest Book Fair and Sale had just about ALL of the best border-area writers including historian Leon Metz, Fred Morales, Lisa Malooly, Frank Mangan and of course superstar Coach Don Haskins.

We had a whole covey of Hillsboro talent including Jan Haley, Max Evans (author of *The Rounders*), artist Robert “Shoofly” Shufelt, Harley Shaw (the world’s authority on mountain lions), petroglyph photographer Embree Hale, Jr., and Sue Bason, artist and bookseller.

And there was a very impressive delegation of Texas writers: Bill Crawford, world-famous author of books about border radio, Stevie Ray Vaughan and many other subjects; Tio and Janell Kleberg of the King Ranch; ninety-six-year-old El Pasoan José Cisneros (an internationally acclaimed illustrator); Wyman Meinzer (the official photographer of Texas); and poet Marian Haddad.

And of course, our old friend, Billie Sol Estes was there. The eighty-year-old Texas wheeler-dealer/con man/swindler was sent to prison in 1963 under a cloud of heavy political pressure in the Lyndon Johnson Era. It was interesting to see El Paso’s only billionaire buying an autographed book from Billie Sol.

EVENTS HAVE BECOME an important part of making El Paso Saddleblanket World Headquarters live up to our new slogan: A one-acre shopping ADVENTURE. We have live music on a weekly basis. Many smaller events—pottery-making demonstrations, Indian Trade Markets, pow wows and art shows—also add a lot. All of these events draw people and help your business.