

Finders Keepers Celebrates Forty Years

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Wednesday, 01 May 2019 10:13 - Last Updated Wednesday, 01 May 2019 10:14



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Dick Andrzejczyk is sweeping the sidewalk outside his shop when I arrive for our interview. It's a familiar sight to anybody who knows downtown Beaufort.

"I like your attire," he cracks. (I'm wearing jeans.) *Very* professional. Especially those flip-flops." (They're sandals, for the record, and perfectly respectable.)

I remain unfazed as we walk into Finders Keepers together. I've known Dick a long time, and this ribbing is part of his shtick. The Curmudgeonly Shopkeep. Beneath that crusty exterior beats a warm and good-humored heart, but you didn't hear it from me.

Finders Keepers is comprised of only three rooms, a surprising fact considering it always feels like a magical forest one meanders through, with twists and turns and hidden treasures in every nook and cranny. For about five years in the mid-2000s, scarcely a week went by that I didn't find myself lured into that charmed labyrinth by my young daughter, under the powerful spell of a mythical creature called Webkinz.

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More on that later.

Like so many great Beaufort stories, Dick's begins with the Marine Corps. He grew up in



the small town of East Hampton, MA, surrounded by women's colleges, and as he approached high school graduation, he says, "the only thing going well for me was the girls." He says he was having too much fun, wasting his time – and his parents' money – so he decided to join the Marines. This brought him to Beaufort, where he ended up working as an air traffic controller at the Air Station.

"That was in the 1950s before there was a Broad River Bridge," he remembers.

He got married in the late 50s and started having children. His kids took some geology classes at school and began bugging their dad to take them digging for rocks. Thus began regular trips to Spruce Pine, NC in Mitchell County – the mining district of North Carolina – and pretty soon the "family hobby" had become Dick's passion. Eventually, he would go on to serve as president of both the Lowcountry Gem and Mineral Society and the Southeast Federation of Mineralogical Societies.

Dick retired from the Marines in 1975, took a year off to clear his head, then went to TCL for two years to redevelop his study skills. After graduating second in his class, he transferred to the College of Charleston, where he graduated summa cum laude with a double major in Business and Geology. Both would serve him well in the years to come . . .

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Which brings us to 1979, and the birth of Finders Keepers.

“It started out as a couple of tables at the Farmers Market in Waterfront Park,” Dick tells



me. He sold stones from his North Carolina mining adventures and seashells he found on the beach. When he wasn't selling, he was fishing over the sea wall. Sometimes he was doing both, simultaneously. He was loving life, and people were loving Finders Keepers. His merchandise sold well. Eventually he started thinking about opening a “real” shop.

“In 1980, most of the storefronts on Bay Street were empty,” he says. “The Thomas Law Building fit what I needed. Jimmy Thomas was living there on the second floor, and he said, ‘We’ve never had any retail in this building. I don’t think you’ll make it.’”

These are not words you should say to Dick Andrzejczyk.

“We did a handshake deal, and it’s still in place today, 40 years later.”

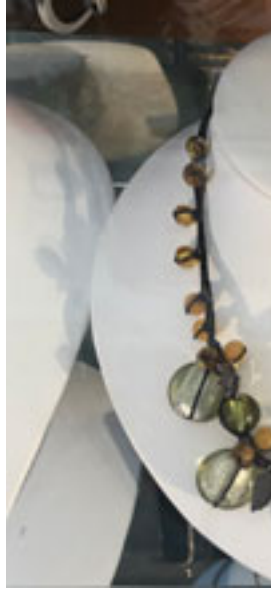
The Thomas Law Building is a historic Beaufort landmark, where Civil War hero and prominent political figure Robert Smalls once held office as the first appointed collector of customs. Dick Andrzejczyk began further burnishing the building’s legacy when he transformed the small room to the left of the entrance into the next iteration of Finders Keepers, where along with stones and shells, he began selling jewelry and clocks, both made by his own hands.

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“I had found a way to make a living from my hobbies,” he says. “It was great!”



Ten years later, when the three large rooms across the hall became available, Dick said, “I’ll take it all!”

“I had no idea how I was going to fill all that space. But what I *did* have was guts. I was a risk taker to the nth degree. Still am.”

He didn’t have to worry about filling the space for long. “One day a sales rep from CBK walked in and said, ‘How about if I fill it up for you?’ I said, ‘There’s no way I can pay you.’ ‘She said, ‘How about if you pay as you sell’? I said, ‘You’ve got yourself a deal.’” The rest is Beaufort retail history.

Finders Keepers may be the most eclectic gift shop you’ll ever enter. I ask Dick to describe what it is he sells, exactly, and he replies, “Anything and everything you never thought you wanted.”

I immediately remember the whimsical, wind-up carousel my daughter spotted – and fell in love with – the summer she was five and my parents were in town visiting. We were strolling

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after dinner when we saw it gleaming in the window of Finders Keepers. The store was closed, but my mom went back the next day and secretly bought the collectible. When we traveled to my parents' house the following December, there it was in their living room – “Amelia’s carousel” – and it’s still the first thing she looks for every Christmas when we return.



More recently, there was the gorgeous sapphire ring my husband surprised me with for my birthday a couple of years ago. Dick dug up the sapphire himself! I wonder how many families in Beaufort have their own Finders Keepers stories? Hundreds, I’ll bet. Maybe thousands.

But what gives this store its staying power? With all the drastic changes in retail over the past decades – big box stores, Internet shopping, etc. – why is it still going strong after 40 years?

“I realized early on that you can’t compete with the big box stores,” Dick tells me. “And you shouldn’t compete with the other stores on your street, either. You have to *complement*, not compete.”

Sometimes, that means ensuring that *others* can’t compete with *you*. In the mid 2000s, when a representative from Ganz came through the door bearing a new product called Webkinz, claiming “they’re gonna be huge!” Dick was highly skeptical, but agreed to take them if he could have an exclusive on all of Beaufort County.

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“We also agreed that if they didn’t sell, I could send them all back.” The man drives a hard bargain.

Dick tried to sell these little stuffed animals, with virtual alter egos, for about a year



with little luck. He was just about ready to pack them up and return them when a Ganz rep appeared on the Today Show to demonstrate the product.

“After that day, it absolutely smoked!” he says. Webkinz became a bona fide phenomenon, and Finders Keepers was the exclusive source in Beaufort County for the next five years, eventually becoming one of the top 10 purveyors in the US.

Occasionally, a young adult will walk into the store, even now, and say “You’re still here, Mr. Webkins!”

After Webkinz, Dick says his most successful products were college logo sun catchers. “Anything collegiate is big,” he says. Currently, Finders Keepers is doing well with collegiate totems, which are prominently displayed in the window. The collegiate birdhouses are also popular, along with hundreds of other artsy, crafty items that have nothing whatsoever to do with college.

And then there’s the Christmas Room. When his pastor blessed the new space in 1990, Dick promised him he’d always keep the back room for Christmas merchandise only. Dick kept

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his promise, and as a result, the Christmas Room has blessed his business.



“I’ve been an entrepreneur most of my life,” Dick says. Except for his early doubts about Webkinz, his gut usually tells him what will and won’t sell.

But that’s not the main secret to his success.

“We have been successful because we give people a personal experience,” he says. “We don’t just greet you when you come in. We actually have a conversation with you. We make you feel welcome.”

Store manager Shelley Hanna, who’s been working at Finders Keepers for almost a decade, concurs. “I love my job because it’s fun *every day*. Most folks who come in here are *happy*.

They’re either looking for a special gift, or they’re on vacation. I love greeting people, talking with them, welcoming them to Beaufort.”

Dick tells me Shelley has become so indispensable to the business – “and like a granddaughter to me” – that when he retires, she’ll take over. In fact, when he dies, she’ll inherit Finders Keepers.

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Even at age 83, it's impossible to imagine this crotchety force of nature "going gentle"



into retirement or death anytime soon, and Shelley's in no hurry. She and Dick have a playful, mutually cantankerous rapport that's endearing. Like family.

Looking back on 40 years, Dick says it's been a very good business – "in recent years, outstanding" – and one of the best parts is seeing people from all over the country return, again and again. And being remembered.

"People come through the store after years, decades even, and say, 'I'm glad you're still here.'"

We're glad he is, too.

To celebrate its 40th Anniversary, Finders Keepers is throwing a big sales event! Markdowns are as follows: May 1, 40%; May 2, 30%; May 3, 20%; May 4, 10%. Markdowns apply to everything but consigned items, coins, and currency.

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Finders Keepers is located at 920 Bay Street in downtown Beaufort. 843-525-9200.

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