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### Reading and more at Molly's Bookstore

**Molly Russakoff's new Italian Market shop will strive to be a center for homeschooling.**

By A.D. Amorosi  
For The Inquirer

On a fall night, a crowd gathered on Ninth Street, in the heart of the Italian Market, to drink sangria, listen to poets, and watch artists in action.

This was the new and improved Molly's Bookstore - a shop that will not only traffic in film exhibition, readings and performance, but also serve as a resource center for homeschooling families. And sell some books, of course.

As *Santa Sangre* unspooled, owner Molly Russakoff, 50, ran around her small shop, hosting and toasting. She hadn't picked the gory horror film for her bookstore's grand reopening party - a pal did. But her 10-year-old son, Johnny, digs it.

"It's cool," he said, brandishing a drawing.

Passersby who've just eaten at Villa di Roma and Pat's Steaks concur. "Do you show this stuff every week?" says one gentleman enthusiastically. "I'll come back for that."

That's what Russakoff hopes: that people crowding the neighborhood will join in the rebirth of Molly's Bookstore as a vital community space. Not only will they buy books, but maybe they'll participate in the "Unschool Clubhouse," a homeschooling resource center that Russakoff plans to open.

"After an abysmal year in the book business, I decided not to slink away from South Philly," Russakoff said. "I hope to be born again."

Russakoff and her store are arguably crucial to the vitality of Philadelphia's literary life. Her connection to literature - writing, teaching, selling - runs as deep as her adoration of her neighborhood.



DAVID M WARREN / Inquirer Staff Photographer

With her two children, Carla Dickie (left) and John Dickie, Molly Russakoff happily shows off her new place on South Ninth Street.

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"Molly changed my life and nudged me forward when I was a just a teenager living in the middle of Nazi Amish wasteland hell," says Philly poet CA Conrad, whose graphic poetry, *The Frank Poems*, were published this summer. "She was a moment of relief in a world of constant fear."

Russakoff grew up in Elkins Park, the daughter of bookseller/teachers Jerry and Shassy Russakoff. She received a bachelor's degree in literature from Stockton State College and studied poetry at the Naropa Institute in Colorado under Allen Ginsberg. She edited prose magazines like *Drunken Boat*, published in *Paris Review* and *Painted Bride Quarterly*, read at St. Mark's Church in Manhattan and Bacchanal on South Street, hosted WXPN-FM's *Spoken Word Hour* in 1985, and won a Pew fellowship in 1993.

While her real-time verse captures the instability of wronged romances and outcast existences - mostly hers from the past - her life embodies a staunch work ethic and familial love. She's close with her parents and her children, Johnny and Carla, 14. She owned 9th Street Books & Records from 1987 to 1997, and Molly's Café at 910-912 Christian St in 2000. Her ties to friends and community are unshakable.

"I met her when I applied at her restaurant for the job of dishwasher," said surrealist poet Ish Klein, 37. "I went to the Iowa Writer's Workshop for Poetry and she went to Naropa. When she read my application, she hired me because of the poetry connection."

When Molly's Café fell apart, so did Russakoff - for a minute. She toyed with the idea of moving out of South Philly and could be heard saying things like, "I'm not in jail. I can leave."

In the end, she decided to stay. She opened Molly's Bookstore near DiBruno's in the winter of 2002.

"The restaurant experience was so intense and disappointing, it took me a year to figure out what to do next," says Russakoff. "But deciding to open a bookstore, I felt like I was coming home, in a sense."

The first few years were great. Molly's made money, hosted a great schedule of readings, and connected with new young writers like the crew of the now-defunct Philadelphia Independent.

But in 2006, everything slid downhill. The book business had radically changed from when she owned 9th Street Books & Records with then-husband Bob Dickie. Internet purveyors such as Amazon took a huge bite out of sales.

"It used to be each of us worked 15 to 20 hours per week. On that, we bought a house, went on tour with his bands, and lived well," she said. "It's harder to sell books, even to buy them. . . . People just changed how they shop."

Other used-book shops, such as Big Jar Books in Old City, joined the rush online. Owner Patrick Richardson-Graham said that his online venture, <http://www.abebooks.com/>, has kept his 10-year business afloat. He's even opening another used bookstore at 709 S. 4th St. this month.

Russakoff followed suit, opening an Amazon account. But for her, selling books on the Internet felt like working for Wal-Mart. She felt lonely and dislocated from her community.

"You're no longer an independent bookseller. You're working for Amazon, a faceless company. It pays the bills. But it depletes your energy and inventory. and changes your outlook on life."

Around the same time, Russakoff noticed a decline in her son John's spirits. His public school gave him headaches and stomach pain; he found himself bullied by big kids when he hit second grade, and he had to be pried out of his mother's car to go to classes.

So Russakoff enrolled him in Upatinas, a private school in Chester County. She wanted Carla to go as well, but the situation at the store made that impossible - especially after she found out her children wouldn't receive financial aid.

Enter the "Unschool Clubhouse." Russakoff plans to turn the bookstore into a resource center for homeschooling for kids of all ages Mondays through Wednesdays. There, they can socialize and take workshops with working artists, most of whom happen to be Russakoff's pals.

"I am targeting people who are more like us, those who are disillusioned or suffering in school and need a viable alternative," said Russakoff. She plans to host free community forums about education on Wednesday evenings at the store (although the center would charge a fee once it opens).

Her two children see it as a win-win scenario. "It really proves how much she cares about not only our welfare, but the welfare of the modern student," said Carla. "The fact that she wants us to have a social life shows that she doesn't

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really care if we're little geniuses, as long as we're happy."

Besides her schoolwork, Carla will work at the store, manning the cash register and helping with the Internet business. She also wants to help with planning, organizing, and advertising the clubhouse. John is looking forward to a drumming and a drawing class.

"They would be in deep trouble if I was their only instructor," Russakoff said. "The trick is to make connections in the community and then make sure as many as possible connect right here in the store."

Russakoff notes that Molly's will remain a bookstore, not a school. But she wants to create a sense of community for kids (and parents) who feel unhappy with the current available options, yet feel homeschooling could be isolating.

"The idea is to make homeschooling a viable alternative," says Russakoff. "Let's face it. What do you remember about school? Algebra or hanging out with your friends?"

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