



Richard Van Nice

January 15, 1948 - April 4, 2018

“A room without books is like a body without a soul” ~ Cicero

Most everybody in town knew Richard. He was the “bookman” and he liked to refer to himself as a “bookie”, but in truth he had the more regal title of “bibliophile”. From the 1970s, when he managed Hatch’s Bookstore in the Capital Hill Mall until 2017, Richard lived a life doing what he loved. Selling, trading and talking about books.

Born in Minneapolis in 1948 to a South Dakota boy (Clem) and a Missoula girl (Margery), he was excited when Clem’s job with the Federal Reserve Bank moved the family back to Montana. He attended Hawthorne Grade School, C.R. Anderson Middle School, Helena High (1966) and graduated from Eastern Montana College with a degree in English. During the Vietnam War, Richard enlisted in the Air Force and served his country as an air traffic controller at a radar station in Thailand.

Richard was a kind and gentle soul. He loved to interact with his customers, revealing his unique (perhaps bizarre) sense of humor and some of the worst puns ever attempted. He especially liked to visit with young readers, sharing his love of books and setting them up for a lifetime of reading.

Our family has selected a Homer Collins painting to represent Richard for this obituary. When Richard bought Hatch’s Bookstore and rebranded it as “Reader’s Roost”, Homer painted a logo for the store. Later, when the bookstore moved to the little house on Lyndale Avenue, the painting always sat behind his desk at the bookstore counter.

Nothing is worse than having your young student announce on a Sunday evening that they have a paper due on Monday morning on the subject of Tibet or Kangaroos or Asteroids. Of course, the public library would already be closed for the night. This happened before the Internet was an information source, but Richard would always come to the rescue. Family and friends would show up at the bookstore and Richard would hand them a stack of books on whatever subject needed to be researched.

Richard is survived by his three siblings, Dave (Thea), Peter (Michelle) and Jill (Jeff) and their families.

In lieu of flowers, the family suggests memorial donations in Richard's name to "Kid's Chance of Montana", a scholarship program for Montana students who have parents that have suffered on the job injuries. Private family services will be held at a later date. To offer a condolence or to share a story about Richard please visit <http://www.helenafunerals.com>.

Comments



“ Sincerest condolences to Richard's family. My 10 years in Bozeman were made so much richer by regular visits to the bookstore. Even after we moved to Colorado and then back to Indiana, I would always stop to check in at the store when passing through Helena. The warmth of Richard's smile always made me feel right at home. I'm nearly two years late in receiving the news of his passing and am saddened more than I can say. But reading all the wonderful remembrances posted here has helped a lot. It's like reliving a few of the many moments I spent in the shop, getting to know and appreciate Richard. Thanks to everyone for sharing your memories publicly.

Richard, you'll always be with those of us fortunate enough to have crossed paths with you.

Mark Sheehan - December 04, 2019 at 12:34 PM



“ My family visited his bookstore frequently while living in Helena. He was a very kind man. Our condolences to the family

Debbie Powley - October 02, 2019 at 10:20 PM



“ With family in Helena MT, I regularly visited the city from Calgary AB. At least a half dozen trips every 2 or 3 years. Beyond relatives, a trip to Richard's store was a staple of every trip, always resulting in the purchase of an overflowing box of books. Richard's input on choosing those books was a delight, as his gently probing questions led me through layers of my interests, to books I would never have found otherwise. His calm and gentle manner hid a powerful intellect and endless curiosity made him a fascinating conversationalist. My salute to Richard on a life lived to his limits. My sympathies to his family, and his other friends on our mutual loss.

Ken Trumble - May 01, 2019 at 02:21 AM



“ Van's was one of my favorite haunts. I spent hours in the after I got my driver's license. I loved visiting with him and cat, smelling the pipe smoke and old books. I loved going in there with my kids to gather new books on a weekly basis. He was always fun and such an example a positive outlook on life. He always loved watching the eagles too! He is loved and will be missed!

Enid Neel - July 26, 2018 at 12:04 PM



“ I really only met him on one occasion, he was a friend to a friend of mine, Dwight stopped in for a book, and introduced me to him and he instantly made me feel at ease and welcomed me into his book store. I know he suffered for a long time with his scleroderma as that meeting was clear back in 2003.
Marla

Marla - May 31, 2018 at 09:03 AM



“ i was lucky enough to know van for a long time ...
was a great guy ...
last fall i saw him sitting in his wheel chair on the sidewalk so i stopped and visited with him for a while ... Van was an amazing guy
and i am sorry for you loss
Dave Simkins

Dave Simkins - April 28, 2018 at 08:08 PM



“ Van would likely have approved of these additional epigraphs:

So many books, so little time. Frank Zappa

Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read.
Groucho Marx

There is no friend as loyal as a book. Ernest Hemingway

I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library. Jorge Luis Borges

Until we meet again in the library.

Jim Hansen - April 11, 2018 at 07:07 PM



“ I will miss Richard greatly. He was a wonderful friend. I tried to see him everytime I came to town to trade and buy books. Loved his stories and his sense of humor.

Misty Hammerbacker - April 10, 2018 at 09:08 PM



“ So many great comments about our friend, Richard Van Nice! I, too, will remember him for his quicker-than-mine wit, and the pause while he waited for me to catch on to his current comment. Oh, I get it, I would finally say, and then we would laugh together.

And walking in the back door of his book store to the pleasant aroma of pipe tobacco, and, often to the chatter around his desk area as he exchanged pleasantries and stories with one of his regulars, while I waited my turn.

When you stepped up to his counter and sat on that high stool, you knew you were in for some humor and uplifting conversation. And I always left his store with several laughs and big smiles in my immediate past, and often, an interesting new fact or two to take with me. Van knew an awful lot about a lot of things. Such fun to visit Richard at his book store!

If there is one thing I will best remember Richard for, it was his sense of humor, and not just that, but his sense of humor in the face of his physical impairments. He always had a fun story to tell about his latest visit to the doctor or dentist. Fort Harrison was the scene of many belly laughs and "Ohhhhh, Richard" responses, when he would bestow one of his witticisms upon an unsuspecting doctor, nurse, or other staffer. Wow, Van had a mental strength.

I will miss him, as will his many customers and friends, often one and the same. With his strong spirit, gentle nature and great humor, he left the world a better place. Yes, indeed.

Tom Mulvaney - April 10, 2018 at 05:20 PM



“ My older brothers and I played with the Van Nice kids when we all went to Hawthorne School. Richard was a couple years ahead of me, so I didn't get to know him until I visited his store. Others have eloquently praised his humor, intelligence, and other virtues below, so I'll take the opportunity here to sincerely agree.

One small story, though: My wife, Patricia, really wanted an out-of-print edition of a series of well-regarded physiography books of the Midwestern states. She's a geologist, soil scientist, and ecologist, so these books were important to her. She'd used them in college. We had planned an AmTrak trip out to the Toledo area (Tiffin, OH) to see her aunt. So I asked Richard if he could get them before we left. He did, and I gave them to her as we went east. Thanks for a great memory, Richard.

With love,

-- Bob Richards

Robert Richards - April 10, 2018 at 03:57 PM



“ I'm sorry that I only knew Richard for about 25 years. An Olympic gold medalist in the world word wit competition, he could always beat me, no matter how hard I mused, to the finishing line. He directed me to Somerset Maugham (among others) and Maugham's quote: "The ability to quote is a serviceable substitute for wit" was appreciated by Richard, for he could not only quote; he could improve on, riff on, play on, and personalize many of the quotes we mortals could barely repeat verbatim. One time he told me he'd thought up a new name for the bookstore. "Have you heard of the movie "Teahouse of the August Moon"? he asked. I'd heard that combination of words somewhere but never had seen this 1957 film based on a 1953 Pulitzer prize winning play. The film (Marlon Brando, Eddie Albert) was a kind of comedy about post WWII American military trying to improve the Japanese by building a school. The Japanese, however, wanted a teahouse instead. The Americans lost the "improvement" battle, winning instead some understanding of a culture much older and less pious than our own.

Think of it: Richard wasn't a man to correct others, or educate them, and certainly not one to accept their money. He was a victim of Viet Nam (think of his hands), and yet he saw this movie as an amusing commentary on the foolishness of domination. How many of us could be so amused and forgiving as to recognize man's inhumanity to mankind and remain composed? His proposed new name for the bookstore?
Teahouse of the august Loon!

Bob Filipovich - April 09, 2018 at 04:42 PM



“ Some of my memories of Richard Van Nice (4/9/18)

I knew Richard for over 20 years—even before I retired 17 years ago to Montana. I am a “bibliophile” always seeking out the nearest used book store. When I retired I brought Richard 13 boxes of books. He entered my name in his book and extended me credit. After about 6 months he said, “Just find whatever you need. I’ll be dead before you ever use up your good standing.” Of course that was 17 years ago. I still brought Richard lots of books and took some out. Sort of like a library. We always had a good chat whenever I came in.

Maybe it was 2005 and my wife Roxann and I planned to go to England and the Republic of Ireland. I asked Richard where he would go in England if he had the chance. Without hesitation he answered, “Hay on Wye.” He added that Hay on Wye was a small market town with two dozen used book stores and an old castle. Roxann put it on our itinerary. It was a delightful visit and we as good tourists took lots of pictures. When we returned home, Roxann made a collage of the pictures and had it framed to give to Richard. It hung in his bookstore for many years. I’m sure he enjoyed experiencing Hay on Wye even through someone else’s eyes.

In 2006 I had a serious medical problem and spent recovery time in Great Falls. Richard was aware and asked Roxann if there was anything he could get for me. At the time I had been reading Dick Francis and I had a list of about 15 titles that I was looking for. Roxann gave the list to Richard. He called her up and said that he had all of them and she could come and pick them up. He refused any payment.

I lost track of Richard about two years ago. Finally this past Christmas I asked Aunt Bonnie if she knew where he was. She did and I got in touch with him through e-mail. I wanted to visit and he suggested waiting until a certain infestation got cleared up. I waited too long which I sincerely regret. As one of many of his multitude of friends I will miss him. I don’t think I ever asked him about a book title that he wasn’t familiar with.

John LaRue (Townsend, Montana)

John N LaRue - April 09, 2018 at 01:46 PM



“ Richard was my high school class mate. I missed him at the last reunion. When I came back to town to see family, I would often stop at the book store & see Richard. A nice guy and an interesting, educated, character. He had health issues for years, but was always positive in attitude. I’ll miss being able to share a word with him.

Rick Spaulding - April 08, 2018 at 08:25 PM



“ A cat for a companion
and insulated by books,
each was tucked in its own nook

Richard's Afro cut hair
became short wave
then came his wheelchair
on which he could race the pave

Our tracks crossed at times
in Nam, Billings and over book spines

He asked, “if you served in Nam,
on which side?” I laughed
but Richard did not let go,
repeating the question tenfold.

Happy trails Richard

Michael Lee
Helena

Michael Lee - April 08, 2018 at 07:10 PM



“ I used to go to Richards shop all the time and trade books for other books, he never made much money from me but was always happy to talk about books. I remember one time he put a philosophy book by Descartes in front of a western and waited till someone asked about it so he could say he put Descartes before the horse.

Joel Grosh - April 08, 2018 at 04:31 PM



“ Our sympathy and prayers for all of the Van Nice family... Richard was one of a kind and over the years loved all of the Richard stories told by (Richard himself and of course Dave and Pete) Steve and Jeri Mosby and family

Steve Mosby - April 08, 2018 at 10:11 AM



“ Peter and family,
We are sorry for the loss of your brother. He sounds like he was a great man. Our thoughts and prayers are with you all. God Bless. Connie and Tim Ferriter

Connie Ferriter - April 10, 2018 at 12:06 PM



“ Dave Peter and Jill and all the Van Nice family
Richard and I became friends when the family moved to Helena. We explored all of the old mines around in the gulches. We would drag home old radios from the second hand stores on South Main. I enjoyed visiting him at the store when I would come up from Portland, OR and when I moved back to Helena in 2014 we were in constant contact.
He will be missed by me.
Chuck Jezick



Chuck Jezick - April 07, 2018 at 10:49 PM



“ He was a most wonderful patient person. I loved his house full of book treasures. My condolences to his family.

Wendy Eaton - April 07, 2018 at 10:44 PM



“ I met Richard 24 years ago when I moved back to Montana. We spent many long hours in his shop talking about every thing from A to Z. You will be missed my old friend. Gods Peace..... Thomas E Redfeather.

Thomas E. Redfeather - April 07, 2018 at 10:32 PM



“ Richard was a good and valued friend of mine in HS. I last saw him at our reunion, he was ever the gracious person I knew those long years ago. RIP Richard, you were a good man and a good friend. Jim DeBoer class of 66

Jim DeBoer - April 07, 2018 at 09:15 PM



“ Richard was one the finest and most gentle souls I have ever encountered. Even while living on the edge he would insist on giving away his books to children, and kept trying to bargain *down* the price of books for his friends. A very erudite man, he could answer many questions off the top of his head. If asked for the most arcane book imaginable he would shuffle back into some dark clogged hallway, reach into an impenetrable pile, and produce it on the spot.

He became a fixture in Helena, almost a legend. The world is a poorer place without him.

John Cartan - April 07, 2018 at 09:12 PM



“ It is with great sadness that I read about Richard's passing. I could always count on him to find a book, share stories, oh, so many funny ones. I will miss him very, very, very much. Thank you Richard for sharing your unique self with us all. My sincere condolences go out to the family.

John Ulberg - April 07, 2018 at 04:41 PM



“ Richard was a wonderful person, I enjoyed the many times spent visiting with him. He will be missed.

Lois Johnson - April 07, 2018 at 02:59 PM



“ I really thought Van was a great man. Full of fun stories and a interesting sence of humor. He was my moms age and could recall some sensitive stories about her brothers lives who passed too early. Helena will miss this man. He was a icon of this town for many years. May you rest peacefully reading your books floating on a cloud in the heavens buddy! Thanks for your time here on earth.

Diana Stewart - April 07, 2018 at 11:55 AM



“ I am so saddened by the loss of Richard, on this Earth. What a treasure trove of organized intellect and a gentleness that permeated his entirety. I went through High School with him and because we were at opposite ends of the alphabet, we often sat across the aisle from each other and would kibitz each other or the lesson or whatever. When I came back to HELENA, I looked forward to seeing him and his collection of books with his innate ability to laugh, kid, and love others. He was a remarkable human being and Heavenly Father has an achieved new angel of bible scriptures.

Diana Connick
Class of 66

Diana Connick - April 07, 2018 at 11:33 AM



“ My deepest sympathy to the Van Nice family.
Carol (Campbell) Zaharko

Carol (Campbell) Zaharko - April 07, 2018 at 11:30 AM



“ Van, just have to say what a delightful man you were and how I miss your expertise and knowledge, suggestion on a good book, but most of all I miss the pipe tobacco aroma of a good book bought from a dusty store after a lively chat. Nothing but found memories. You are missed.
Jill Tode

Jill Tode - April 06, 2018 at 08:15 PM



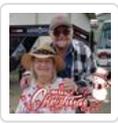
“ Dearest Van - how I will miss your humor, stories and information on most any subject. Your friendship was treasured.
Always,
Debbie (Feller) Simmons

Debbie Feller - April 06, 2018 at 06:46 PM



“ Richard was a very knowledgeable and kind man who knew so much about books. May he rest in peace. He is not forgotten.

Cathy Siegner - April 06, 2018 at 09:31 AM



“ Inez Slayman lit a candle in memory of Richard Van Nice



Inez Slayman - April 05, 2018 at 02:51 PM



“ My heartfelt thoughts and wishes to Richard's family. He never knew a stranger. He enjoyed talking with everyone who visited his book store. When stopping in one day, he talked with me and my children in a few languages about his travels. When my daughter was grown, she also stopped in with her girls. He was greatly missed when the book store closed. Farewell my friend and hope you find that new old library.

Inez - April 05, 2018 at 03:02 PM



“ We are so very sorry to her of Richards passing. He worked with my husband Steve at the Federal Reserve Bank, and they became good friends. You are all in our thought and prayers!

Teresa Anderson - April 07, 2018 at 05:47 PM



“ I purchased several books from him. The community will surely miss his expertise. Very kind person. Prayers for the family.

DONA DOBLER - April 08, 2018 at 10:07 AM



“ Our sympathy and prayers for all of the Van Nice family... Richard was one of a kind and over the years loved all of the Richard stories told by (Richard himself and of course Dave and Pete) Steve and Jeri Mosby and family

Steve Mosby - April 08, 2018 at 10:10 AM



“ Van, I am going to miss the hours of sitting across from you at the counter in the store, discussing literature, aviation, cinema, digital scanners, politics, current events, favorite fragrant pipe tobacco, the weather, your adventures in Vietnam, the Air Force, and all the other incredibly interesting and informative subjects you were well versed in. You were truly a Renaissance Man, Amigo. Van, you didn't let your medical conditions turn you sour. You were kind to all and always quick with an anecdote to cheer up any visitor to the store who might be feeling down. I was proud to have you for a friend. God Speed. You will be missed. I will remember you every time I open up a book or smell the aroma of a burning pipe. The world is a much better place for having had you in it for a season. Rest in peace and thank you for your service.

Nate Wilburn - April 08, 2018 at 12:54 PM



“ My friend you've gone afar but in my heart...here you are. RIP Richard as we treasure those good books you inserted into our minds. Cindy Humphrey

Cindy Humphrey - April 10, 2018 at 12:23 AM



“ Richard was an immediate friend and resource for all of the people I sent his way. What an exceptional person - his memory was phenomenal. We "traded" books over many years, a few months passed one winter and when I came in he had a stack ob biographies he knew

I would want. He was never too busy to chat and reminded me of the good things in a simple life.

He will be missed but never forgotten.

Mary Runkel

Mary Runkel - April 10, 2018 at 02:38 PM



“ Van was one of my dearest friends. I spent many hours in his bookstore visiting, joking and re-arranging his books. He was unfailingly positive about life, in spite of having seen the darker sides of it. He didn't really sell books. In many cases the more you argued about trying to give him money for a book, the lower the price would get. I think that he would say that his only regret in life was not winning the Publishers' Clearinghouse sweepstakes, so that he could go into The Strand Bookstore in NYC and say "I'll take one of everything". I will miss his stories, his humor and his empathy.

Cheryl Glenn - April 10, 2018 at 04:16 PM



“ I knew him as Dick, Richard and Van at stages of his life. We both graduated from Helena High School in 1966. What an interesting life he led. He knew so much about so many things, particularly books, and of course, life. It was nearly impossible to buy books from him. Richard would say he couldn't make too much money or he risked losing his benefits, so he didn't want to charge for the books. Rather than arguing, it was easier to wait and slip some cash near the till when he was busy talking to someone else. His store was dusty and cluttered. I was always afraid it might burn down sometime when he was lighting his pipe. Yet when I would ask about some books, he would move to various piles and stacks and pull them out immediately. He would watch which books I would pick out when I was browsing and immediately tell me all about them and recommend other similar books or other books by the same author. It made me wonder if he had indeed read every book in the place.

Like others, I remember his sense of humor and quick wit, including his groan-inducing puns, and his kindness. I admired him for maintaining his good sense of humor even as his health problems mounted.

Here's a story I heard about Richard. One of the sons of his brother Dave and his wife Thea was a star basketball player at Capital High (and later Carroll). Because of his disability, Richard wasn't able to attend the games in person or at least not often. Instead, he tape-recorded every one of the radio broadcasts of his nephew's games and presented them all to him as a surprise gift. This shows what a kind and thoughtful man he was. Rest In Peace, Richard.

Chuck Johnson - April 10, 2018 at 10:41 PM



“ On behalf of the Van Nice family we would like to thank everyone for their kind words.

Dave Van Nice - April 11, 2018 at 06:42 PM