

# After a Century the Randalls name is still going strong.

By Ben Burd



**Figure 1**

Randalls has been around Port Hope for a very very long time; always on the Main Street. Not in printing anymore but still alive and kicking after adapting to the new realities of modern-day business. The business sign says it all - Cards, Gifts, Stationery, Office Furniture; they do it all.

It wasn't always that way. Mel Talbot purchased the business from Mildred Hancock, who was a Randall, in 1977, and it was a full service bookstore selling cards, books, and gifts. Randalls had been in the printing trade since the turn of the Century and as they and small printers fell by the wayside they looked to other lines of business to carry them through. Mel who had been in retail

since he came back from the War in 1945, moved to Port Hope in 1953, from the Belleville area, and he's been here ever since. Starting as the owner of a hardware store on Ontario St. He moved into Randalls and became a purveyor of printed goods instead of nails and tools and paint.

When Mel moved from the paint store to the gift store he left his son Jamie in charge of paint and accepted the challenge of running Randalls. Jamie had gone to College after graduation and emerged with a Business Administration qualification and Mel felt the hardware store was in good hands, so he felt really good about the new setup. As Mel says, "Jamie came in and gave me a hand and he's been here ever since." Now Jamie is the President of the Company but Dad still comes in to help when and wherever he can and that's on a daily basis. When the paint store closed Jamie came over to help out and then assume command of Randalls.

Randalls in 2011 has three retail stores (Port Hope, Cobourg, (in the Mall) and Trenton) and a warehouse in Port Hope that ships product on a daily basis to an area that spans from the eastern border of the GTA to the East side of Belleville and North into the Kawarthas. The opportunity to acquire Darlings of Trenton, a long established printer,



**Figure 2**

came along and as Mel tells it, “We had the chance and we took it.” and then there were three (stores that is). The main products shipped from the warehouse in Port Hope are office supplies and office furniture, a long way from the books and china place settings of twenty five years ago. That is the key to Randalls success - they have adapted to a fast moving and fluid market setting. Books are longer part of the mix. Mel told Business Times that “It just became too much work for the return, we spent a lot of time packing up unsold books and returning them.” Same thing for the china place settings, that are stored upstairs, “Markets have changed and not many people are buying china, we still have lines of figurines but the settings have gone.” In fact Mel says that trying to guess public preference is very hard to do but it is made easier with three retail outlets. “With minimum orders the norm we can move the stock around the three stores to help out and avoid keeping the inventory in stock for the next season. In fact while researching the this article Business Times noticed that special seasonal displays have gone the way of the dodo. In Cobourg giftshop retailer Manfred Schumann of Paper-Lace says he gave up ordering Christmas supplies a few years ago. “It was too hard guessing what the public wanted and if it didn’t sell I was stuck with it. I keep the same stock all year round and now people will come in and buy their Christmas presents in August!” Despite that problem Randalls still has Christmas displays in all of their stores that one sees as soon as the store is entered - impressive.

As part of the realignment of product and business reorganization Jamie hired Lysie Laurie to head up business development in 2007. Hired to dig and find new business as well as to reassure and nurture existing customers Lysie has been successful. Business is up forty to fifty percent, in the commercial sector. “Our customers didn’t know what we could offer them what we can” Lysie stated. In fact Randalls probably doesn’t know its own capabilities until they try. Mel explains the company attitude towards business when he says, “We can do the job from start to finish - design and installation, we can offer more than just office supplies we do office installations not just cubicles.” But explains just how responsive the Company is on all of its jobs, “Nothing goes perfectly, but we can fix it quickly, the big boxes don’t do that.”



**Figure 3**

The references to the “big box” is the fight for business with the large retailers, *Staples* being the bogeyman. Since the coming of the big box retail store Main Streets all over the world have been hit with low prices and consumer preference for the retail style that large stores provide. Mel says that the card and gift business really took a hit when the big stores came in but customers still want cards and Randalls still sell them (buying a card at Randalls is a monster chore - they have over a hundred feet of display space and ten thousand cards to browse through) But Randalls has fought back. Being a part of

the national buying group "Office Plus" has enabled them and thousands of other small business owners to pare their inventory costs to a level that allows them to compete with the big boxes. "We can compete on price with *Staples* but not the advertizing" Mel says "and we win on service. We just have to work harder to make our customers aware of what we can do."



**Figure 4**

Looking forward both Lynsie and Mel spoke about the problem of being a local supplier to both Municipalities and larger Companies in the area. Randalls has lost the chance to sell to these sectors because larger supply companies - especially *Staples* - have enticed the larger local companies and some Municipalities with up front bonuses to sign long term agreements. Some of the enterprises enticed just signed and cut off local suppliers. It has hurt Randalls and Mel did tell Business Times that Randalls has adjusted, "But it would have been nice to have been asked to compete!"

Asked about the impact of the recent downturn in business Mel admitted that, "The last two or three years haven't been that good but the staff stays with us." That is a comment on the way the Talbots run the shop. With twenty regular employees, they were up to twenty-four at one time, they run a tight ship. With regular attendance at Company Training events and seminars the employees are all kept up to date on the latest trends in the industry. Priding itself on the credo of the Company - "Service, service and more service" the employees are all part of a tight team that the Talbots enjoy and recognise.

The future looks good as Randalls certainly does not live in the past. Fast turnaround service is the norm and the practice of shipping orders on a next day delivery, if the order is received before 4pm, is mandatory. To help in this practice phone and fax lines are open 24 hours a day and about five percent of customers regularly use the online ordering system. Looking forward to the next five years, under the leadership of Jamie, Randalls aims to keep on doing what it has been doing the last five - nimbly adjusting to market conditions, cultivating new customers and nurturing existing ones and looking for new angles on a familiar theme all the while trying to cope with the problem of watching established suppliers leave the industry. The last word goes to Mel, "We have super customer loyalty and people come in as a result of that loyalty." All in all a big thank you from all at Randalls to all of its customers. Loyalty begets loyalty.

Layout notes:

Figure 1        randalls storefront.jpg - no caption

Figure 2        jamie at desk.jpg - caption = "Jamie Talbot at his desk"

Figure 3        cards east.jpg - caption = "10,000 cardss in 100' of display"

Figure 4        lynesie and mel.jpg - caption = "Lynsie Laurie and Mel Talbot"