

# The gang's all here

**Branford Book & Card Club: A Sunday morning hub by any other name**

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By Lisa Reisman

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**O**N A RECENT SUNDAY morning at the Branford Book & Card Shoppe, Kate Marsland, who had come in for a newspaper, was talking about a general store called "The Hub" in Nantucket, where she had just vacationed.

Despite its name, she said, "The Hub" was no Branford Book & Card Shoppe, the iconic family-operated business on the corner of Park and Main, which has been open nearly 40 years.

Other than owner Bob Esposito's son Sal, who was ringing Marsland up, no one of the roughly dozen figures crowding the small space between the front counter, the glass case of chocolates and the shelves of New York Times bestsellers, heard what she said.

That's because a meeting of the Branford Book & Card Club, which has convened from 7:45 to 9 a.m. each Sunday for the past five years, was in session. It was, however, not in order, with loose clusters of two and three engaged in casual banter, as golden oldies played in the brightly lit shop and church bells tolled from across the town green.

Which meant that the club was not fulfilling its mission statement. Except there is no mission statement. Nor is there an official website with bios of its members, a calendar of events and a photo gallery. Or even a logo.



Melanie Stengel/New Haven Register photos

The gang at Branford Book & Card Shoppe: Pat McCarthy, left, owner Bobby Esposito, George DeMayo, George Cornachini, Pat Vissicchio and Stan Konesky Jr. are some of the guys who get together on Sunday mornings.

There are, however, certain unwritten rules, one of which limits club members to one-syllable words.

"This club is not about fostering language development," said George DeMaio, known throughout the state as "The Coach," who certain members accused of being the club's president, a declaration affirmed with a nod by Pasquale "Patsy" Vissicchio (not to be confused with Pat McCarthy).

The restriction to one-syllable words is, arguably, in keeping with a second rule, which holds that any discussion, while "taking up all the issues of the



Rose Esposito, left, gives a spearmint leaf candy to Tristan Giordano, who was at the store with his grandmother, Diane Giordano.

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# The Gang: Branford Book & Card is their 'clubhouse' on Sundays

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world," as retired New Haven firefighter Joe DeCato put it, should not range to politics or religion.

Unless, it seems, a customer asks where Rose is, referring to Bob's older sister Roseann Baroncini, a treasured presence behind the front counter, at which time someone in the club inevitably answers that Rose is at church, praying for them.

Also known as "Rosie" or "sweet Rose" or "my darling Rose," Baroncini is not a member of the club. Which is not to say the club practices any form of discrimination. Quite the contrary.

There's a Pole, a Ukrainian, at least two Irishmen, a handful of Italians that grew up together on Wooster Square, and a woman named Kelley who's known as Peggy on some weeks and Dawn on others for no discernible reason and doesn't mind it a bit.

That kind of easy camaraderie among club members is, in a way, an extension of the store itself, said Stan Koneski, a retired Branford police officer.

"Bob Esposito gets it," said Koneski, standing in front of the largest magazine collection on the Shoreline. "He gets that a town needs a gathering place where people can get together and tell stories and reminisce and laugh about what's going on in their daily lives. He, and his son Sal, and Rose, and the rest of his family, they've created that small-town atmosphere here."

That's why you won't find any club mem-

ber ducking into the Hallmark greeting card aisle to check an iPhone

Esposito family doesn't do cold and impersonal.

This is a place where

you like to play in the lottery; where Bob will ask how your grandchildren are doing and if you're feeling better from that cold last week, and Sal will mention he saw your mother the other day and she looked great.

This is a place where, like any general store that has stood the test of time, its proprietors recognize their customers are their lifeblood so they stock whatever they might need, and if they don't have it, they'll get it within the week, and when they get it, they'll call.

That's why Bob Esposito named his shop Branford Book & Card and

not The Hub, and never considered changing it, not in any of the years since he opened its doors

in February 1974, not in the roughly 14,000 days he's arrived at the store at 4:45 a.m. to cut the twine on the morning papers and set them out on the outside stands. There's no need to state the obvious.

And why the Branford Book & Card Club has no mission statement. The club — and the shop, for that matter — have no use for one. They know their reason for existing. They're reminded each time another member shows up, another customer comes in.

Perhaps Earl McDonald, who appeared just as the meeting was adjourning, put it best. "You won't see me again," he said solemnly to Sal. "Until tomorrow," he added after a beat, his face breaking out in a broad grin as he walked out the door.

Branford Book & Card Shoppe is located at 1024 Main St., Branford. 203-488-5975. Hours are 5 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday and 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekends.



Members of the club — front row, from left to right: George DeMaio; George Cornachinni; Bob Esposito; Dan Sowa; and Frank Mastriano. Back row, left to right: John Garcia; Stan Koneski; and Joe DeCato. Submitted photo.

for the latest tweets and texts. This is all about face-to-face, person-to-person familiarity. The

one look at your face and Rose will remember your name, your favorite candy bar, and which numbers