



- Kelly Scanlon: Joining us on this episode of Banking on Kansas City is Vivien Jennings, the founder and president of Rainy Day Books. Vivien joins us to talk about Rainy Day Books's innovative business model, how it has allowed the bookstore to thrive. We'll also be discussing some unexpected benefits the model brings to Kansas City. Welcome Vivien.
- Vivien Jennings: Thank you. Good to be here, Kelly.
- Kelly Scanlon: I am so excited to help get your story out here. You're a full-service independent bookstore here in Fairway, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City, but your reputation is far from local. You're known globally, and again, that's a feat in this day and age and key to your business model are your author events. You started those in the 1990s and you have more than 300 a year. It's one of the most robust programs in the country. Tell us about that. What inspired it and how is it working for your business?
- Vivien Jennings: We made the decision to not be defined by our geography and say to people, "You have to come to Fairway," but that we would go out and into the community and sort of take our show on the road. At first we partnered with Unity Temple on the plaza, and then we partnered with other venues. We wanted our customers to have a memorable author event experience.
- Vivien Jennings: The funny thing is first we had to get Kansas City on the map because when I first started going to New York, and they would say, "Where is your bookstore?" And I would say, "Kansas City," and their eyes would glaze over. They just didn't believe that there were any readers here. And so we had to show them that people read in the big wheat field just like they read in the Big Apple.
- Kelly Scanlon: Yes, in fact, they're an underserved markets.
- Vivien Jennings: They actually then started to realize there are avid readers here, and they started to spread the word through their author network. And I think that the other thing is is that they began to realize that Kansas City is friendly, hospitable, and they were surprised by the fact that it's beautiful and green.

Kelly Scanlon: It's not wheat field after wheat field.

Vivien Jennings: That's right. They had this funny idea, or Indians and board sidewalks.

Kelly Scanlon: Sure, sure, yeah.

Vivien Jennings: But then what happened was too is that authors then began to ask to come here because they spread the word, how great it was. And then the publishers began to come to us. And so now they'll say to us, "Will you host Sally Field? Will you host John Grisham?" So that's coup.

Kelly Scanlon: Now, you've brought in some tremendous talent and given Kansas Citians an opportunity to hear from and even meet people they would've never had access to before. And so that is a service in and of itself, yeah.

Vivien Jennings: And you know what, Kelly? If you think about it, what other opportunity would you have to get a really pretty up close and personal experience with all these famous people, at least for very little money, the cost of the book.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah.

Vivien Jennings: Not possible.

Kelly Scanlon: Right, you didn't really go into the format of these author events, but it's more than a book signing.

Vivien Jennings: That's right.

Kelly Scanlon: And so tell us a little bit about the events themselves.

Vivien Jennings: Well, it's often a conversation with me because what we discovered, we love to analyze things, Roger and I, so what we discovered is is that authors are sometimes very quiet, solitary people.

Kelly Scanlon: True.

Vivien Jennings: So many of them could not give a real lively talk.

Kelly Scanlon: Good point.

Vivien Jennings: So we thought, well, maybe a conversation where they can be relaxed, and so we tried it and the the customers said, we love listening to our customers, and so the customers said, "You know what? Can you do that again? Can you do that often?" Because they liked it. And when I do the conversations, I write scripts for them, but it's just kind of loose. But what I'm thinking is when I'm talking to the celebrity or to just the author, I'm thinking just like I'm talking to them as a customer, and they're talking to me as a customer. So really, I'm not too

involved in it, except to sort of throw them a ball. They throw the ball back at me.

Kelly Scanlon: Right.

Vivien Jennings: But it's really I want them to feel like that the customers just have that relationship, and they just love it, yeah.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah, it makes it very intimate.

Vivien Jennings: That's right.

Kelly Scanlon: Like you're getting to listen in on a conversation with this celebrity, as you say, that you've got a front row seat to that.

Vivien Jennings: And sometimes, we partner with a lot of people, so there's a special experience like when we brought Walter Isaacson in for his new book at the time on Steve jobs. We partnered with Apple. We partnered with AT&T, and a few others and so forth. We partnered with Country Club Bank. So we had all of our partners there, and we gave away some of Apple's technology brand new that nobody had ever seen. And Roger actually ran the conversation from a new product that Apple had done. So there was all this exposure. People, they love the technology of it.

Vivien Jennings: But then the funny thing was the presence of both AT&T Missouri and Kansas were there. So the president of AT&T Missouri came up to us at the end and said, "How many employees do you have?" And Roger said, "Ten." And he said, we have 155,000 and he said, "This is incredible. This is incredible."

Vivien Jennings: And also the head of Walmart one time said to us, we did an event with a sports figure, and he came up to us at the end that said, "How big is your store?" And I said, "2,500 square feet." And he said, "That's a department."

Kelly Scanlon: Right. You have put yourself on the map with these events and Kansas City as well. But here in Kansas City, we know about them. We're used to it, yet other people aren't. And so [inaudible 00:05:59] School of Business decided to do a case study on Rainy Day Books and your author events. Tell us about that study and what the entrepreneurs in the class learned, and what you learned from it as well.

Vivien Jennings: It was really a two way street on that because they would do the case study, and then we would go at the end and be available to them for them to ask questions to us. So we learned a lot because they would ask us, "Well, why did you do that?" And then we would have to think, "Why did we do that?" But then with them and to them, we said, "The most important thing is work-life balance. It's that you should put family before work."

Vivien Jennings: Entrepreneurs are different because they are the bottom line for their business. And so technology and especially the internet has really been both a blessing and a curse. But you still, and we really emphasize this, you have to put your family and friends first.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah. You can be always on with technology.

Vivien Jennings: Yeah, yeah.

Kelly Scanlon: The author events have been very successful for you. You tried earlier on another expansion model that really didn't work that well, and that was opening in multiple locations. So tell us about that experience and what you learned from that.

Vivien Jennings: Well, actually what we did was we licensed the name and system to some individuals who approached us and asked us to help them open bookstores. But then what happened was is that holding standards and consistency in the system was very difficult. And so what I say is is that generally getting consensus with a group of entrepreneurs is like herding cats, you know?

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah.

Vivien Jennings: So we decided to really part company with them and focus on our innovative ideas so that we could move very quickly in a very rapidly changing industry.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah, and that's a good message to entrepreneurs who may be listening. They tell you that you need to stay focused, and that if you do deviate, just fail fast if it's not working out. And it sounds like you followed that advice, and look at you today. You obviously, and not unexpectedly, have literacy at the core. That's your passion. And part of what you do is take Kansas Citians and expose them to some of the literary traditions in other countries. You have an annual literary tour. So talk to us about that and how'd it get started? What's it like when you go with you on one of these?

Vivien Jennings: Roger and I ran into Lisa Ball of Lisa Ball Travel Design, another great entrepreneur. And so we ran into her at SPIN! Pizza. I had worked with her at [inaudible 00:00:08:41], so I asked her, "What are you doing now?" And she said, "Well, I'm planning travel tours." We sat down and visited, and she said, "You know what? Would you and Roger be interested in hosting a literary tour and maybe every year?" And I said, "Yeah, I think we would." So we did England first and then we did Italy and then we did Scotland and then we did Canada, then we did Ireland and this year we did France even though it was 110 degrees.

Kelly Scanlon: Oh, it's been brutal, yeah. So what are these tours like? Do you go and visit historic literary places?

Vivien Jennings: Yes.

Kelly Scanlon: Or meet meet authors?

Vivien Jennings: Yes, we meet authors. We go to historic literary places just like you said. We meet authors and have dinners and cocktails with them and tea sometimes. We had tea in Paris. But it also incorporates art, music, historical sites, all those things. So it's not just a literary tour, but that's kind of the focus of it. But this year, we were so happy that when we went to Giverny, Monet's gardens, that the waterlilies were blooming.

Kelly Scanlon: How wonderful.

Vivien Jennings: And we had some books on Monet, yes, but that was fun. And then we went down to Provence. There had been a book on the lavender fields and then we saw, it was just extraordinary, we saw the lavender fields blooming.

Kelly Scanlon: That had to be gorgeous.

Vivien Jennings: Yeah, it was gorgeous.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah.

Vivien Jennings: So it's all of those things.

Kelly Scanlon: How big are these, about what?

Vivien Jennings: Usually we take about 20 people, 22, but this year we took 30 because everybody was wanting to go to France. They didn't know how hot it was. They didn't know how hot it was going to be.

Kelly Scanlon: Sure. No, wonderful service that you offer to Kansas City. I assume they are all from Kansas City then?

Vivien Jennings: You know what? No.

Kelly Scanlon: No, okay.

Vivien Jennings: No, there was Oklahoma, Iowa, and Minnesota, and then Kansas City people. And you know what? It was so great because they were like a family. They were like a big family. They all got along. They were all fun, big readers obviously, but it was really like taking your family.

Kelly Scanlon: No, it struck me as you were describing all the different states that people were from that once again, you're introducing people to one another that now I have people outside of Kansas City that I can stay in touch with-

Vivien Jennings: Absolutely.

Kelly Scanlon: ... and talk with about not just the trip, but maybe other books, and so you've opened up many more doors.

Vivien Jennings: We keep up with them by email and pictures and things like that. Yes, yes.

Kelly Scanlon: You have done so much here in the Kansas City area, but you also have worked with the independent booksellers in spite of all of the 300-plus author events, your tours, your literary tours, and everything else that you do, you still find time to serve on panels and committees and so forth to help raise the profile and basically mentor the independent bookseller community. So why do you feel that's so important? You could just do what you do and be happy with that. But no, you give your time to raise others up in the industry.

Vivien Jennings: Well, I think that Roger and I, yes we are on panels, national panels, sometimes international panels, but a lot of national panels, talking about what we do. We give them ideas and share our information about how we do the author events. But I really think that sharing is the best thing to do. I mean, I have 45 years, or 44 years I guess, of experience in the business. Roger has 25. That's a lot of experiences to share with people.

Kelly Scanlon: It is.

Vivien Jennings: And I just feel like that we have to give back. And the other thing is we can tell them all those things, but then they realize this is how hard they work, because Roger and I are at 99.9% of the events that we do.

Kelly Scanlon: You're there personally.

Vivien Jennings: The owners are there, yes.

Kelly Scanlon: You referenced that you have 44, 45 years in the book industry. What has changed besides the technology, besides the online component that we are all well aware of? Have readers changed? Have their habits changed where you've had to make adjustments in those areas?

Vivien Jennings: Each category goes up and down. I think one of the great things that came along was the creation of book clubs and the growth of the clubs because it wasn't so much about the books, but Kelly, they sort of re-created the neighborhood because neighborhoods have kind of gone away.

Kelly Scanlon: Yes, So true.

Vivien Jennings: So people getting together, either husbands and wives, or women, them getting together as a group and talking about not just the books but all sorts of things, I think that was really, really special and we were so happy to be able to support that, yeah.

Kelly Scanlon: You have a philosophy that bigger isn't better, that better is better. Business advisors will often tell their clients that to be really good at something, you have to figure out what it is you're good at and just focus on that and not worry about the other things. So as you look back, what is it that you are best at as a business?

Vivien Jennings: I think it's our interpersonal relationships with the customers because if you truly care, they'll truly care. And it's the value of the customer... By the way, it's really not about the money, it's about their time. Their time is so valuable these days, so that's what you're sort of vying for.

Kelly Scanlon: As you look back over the nearly five decades of Rainy Day Books, what do you think its legacy is?

Vivien Jennings: You know what? We call it the legacy of literacy. And after all, you ask when you get further along in business or when you get further along in age, which is my case and Roger's case sort of, that you ask, "What did it matter that we were here?" And I think that we just still, we have a passion for this business, and we just find it thrilling to watch people leave our events with the knowledge that authors and their books can expand your awareness, improve your health, make you laugh, and touch your heart, and encourage people to achieve a better life in a better world. It doesn't get any better than that.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah, so beautifully said. So beautifully said. Now, for Kansas Citians who may not for whatever reason, maybe just if through this podcast finding out about you today, where is your bookstore located in Fairway, and I mean, how can they get your books or how can they support you?

Vivien Jennings: Oh, that's wonderful. Well, our store is in the Fairway Shops at Belinder and Shawnee Mission Parkway, so that's pretty easy to find. And the other thing is they can find out about our author events. They can look on rainydaybooks.com, and see the entire calendar coming up through December. We keep adding every day just about, so they can kind of keep track of it. They can subscribe to our newsletter by just going in and putting their email in it. They maintain it. They can take it off if they want to. But those are the ways that they connect with us.

Vivien Jennings: But you know what I really want them to do? I want them to come in the store, so that we can start to build that relationship with them, and we say, "What do you feel like reading today?"

Kelly Scanlon: Right.

Vivien Jennings: Not just like, "What do you feel like reading?" Period. "What would you like reading today?" You feel like it. And then they'll say, "Today, I feel like a thriller." And so I go and say that to them. But I think that that's the best thing is to keep building that relationship. And the other thing is, is that you have to be a little

patient. You have to be willing to sow those seeds. And then have patience for the harvest because building relationships takes some time, but you can wait for the outcome.

Kelly Scanlon: Well, it does, and that outcome for you in many cases, has been serving the children and grandchildren even of some of your original customers.

Vivien Jennings: Absolutely. I now see, and it's really, I go, "Oh my gosh," and I'll see the grandchildren of the people that I first served. And I see these little kids who used to come in the store and sit on the floor. Now they're six feet tall.

Kelly Scanlon: They're bringing their children in.

Vivien Jennings: Yes.

Kelly Scanlon: That has to be, we talked about legacy before, and that has to just make you [crosstalk 00:16:58].

Vivien Jennings: It makes me so happy.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah.

Vivien Jennings: So happy. And my son, by the way, will tell you, he grew up in the bookstore and he will say he has an MBA in marketing and a law degree, and he will tell you the best education he had was reading books in the back of the bookstore.

Kelly Scanlon: I bet. What a fun childhood.

Vivien Jennings: Yep.

Kelly Scanlon: That just sounds so terrific. Vivien, thanks for all you do for literacy, for Kansas City, and we wish you continued success and appreciate you stopping by to visit with us today on this episode of Banking on Kansas City.

Joe Close: This is Joe Close, president of Country Club Bank. When I hear Vivian speak of Rainy Day Books's legacy of literacy, it inspires me. Seeking truth and knowledge through reading informs us about our world and about others. Reading expands your awareness, helps you achieve a better life, and in turn forms a better world. That's a legacy worth building and protecting. That matters.

Joe Close: At Country Club Bank, we share Vivien and Rainy Day Books's desire to leave behind a legacy of good, a legacy of banking on a better world. Like literacy, investing in your own financial literacy opens up new opportunities by building knowledge of how to effectively manage your finances. It helps open that door to your first house or your forever home. A legacy matters and leaving behind one built on integrity and commitment is one worth protecting. Thanks for joining us for this episode. We're banking on you, Kansas City.

