

Interview with Mike Kuzak March 14, 1996  
Northern Michigan University Bookstore

INT: Could I have your date of birth?

MK: March 26, 1952

INT: Where are you from originally?

MK: I was just thinking about that the other day. I actually grew up in two towns, Channing and Sagola. I probably call Sagola my home town, even though I never really lived in those towns, I lived on the outskirts of both of them. ?? and also in between them.

INT: okay, did you move here for the job?

MK: I moved here to go to school. I worked in the bookstore while attending Northern and then I left here for a few months. When a job here at the bookstore, the assistant manager position opened up. Mr. Hubbard called me asked if I would be interested in applying for it and I did. Eventually got the job. Then that position went to the manager position when Mr. Hubbard retired.

INT: Okay and then you graduated from Northern.

MK: yes

INT: With what kind of degree?

MK: a bachelors degree in 1974,

INT: In management?

MK: I was an Econ major. Math minor

INT: And why did you chose Northern's bookstore to manage or did it just kind of appeal to you when you got the offer you accepted.

MK: I think I am in the same category that a lot of managers fall into, that college bookstore manager's fall into. Most people don't grow up planning on being a college bookstore manager. Your really ???. There is really nothing wrong with it or negative about it, it is just not ?? area to go into. People who like books tend to think of library or librarian or if they like retailing they may think of retailing of the actual situation private sector. The people who do manage are people that brought upon the bookstore to the college years recommended students who fell in love with it and found a job opportunity ? in management. In my case. I was a Northern student and then timing ?? position opened around the time I graduated.

INT: when did you begin work there.

MK: in 1974.

INT: as an Assistant Manager?

MK: right

INT: And then when you became manager, when did you were you assistant manager, 74 until

MK: until 1993, July 1st

INT: and that is when became manager.

MK: That is when I became acting manager. Until the search was completed for manager, we had to go through a search process advertise the position properly. And that process took a hole year. So I actually didn't really start the manager position until June 22, 1994.

INT: What does your job consist of, things are obvious, the buying of books.

MK: I don't do much buying, I supervise those people that do buy. Involved with the training of them, the position has changed throughout the years. they say, The textbooks the manager should spend about 80% of his or her time on the sales floor training about customer service and setting up displays. Because this store is attached with an University there is a lot more administrative duties than there are retail duties. I consider myself an administrator much of the time. There is budget, that I am looking at today, all the financial report has to be done. The connection with the University, the community work and reporting to two superiors and retail part is to monitor the financial information and make adjustments as necessary watch the budget, watch the inventory levels, and some what guardian of financial picture, and then there is all those procedures that come upon us by the University or are placed upon us the financial procedure placed upon us by the internal auditors, I need to monitor it and make sure everyone is following it. Then there is typical things hiring, firing, scheduling all those personal things. And all the recording that go with it.

INT: that is a big job. What was the appearance when you began, has it changed a lot in the last couple of years.

MK: Quite a bit. Physical appearance.

INT: yes, could you tell me about that?

MK: quite a bit. We are in entirely different location today that we were in 1970 when I started there we went through an expansion in 1973 in the summer, another expansion in possibly 1974 and in approximately 1984, then in 1994 we moved over to new location and each time we remodeled the store somewhat. We ? expansion, we expanded in two directions, mostly, mainly in the sales floor but we also expanded in our stock inventory. The University center has

been good location for the bookstore, we are fortunate to have room to expand without having to push out all the walls. We are able to relocate some offices and gather some ? from the ? stock ? ? we were kind of given the middle east wing at one time, and we pushed in both directions, towards the Cohodas building by taking, add a hallway level three between the north side of east wing and the ? area, which houses the top part of the crossing the tower, we ? that up ? the housing offices near the front of the east wing, we also extended our stock room by stealing stock room space from food service at the other end of the store chain link fence that we erected and pushed in their direction so stock room space from them.

INT: Okay, so you said there was a new location remodeled in 1994, which was like here when you moved here, well what was the extension needed for? Was that in a different building?

MK: That again took in the entire half of the East Wing. Eventually in '73 moved across the hall and took part of housing we didn't take it all. The UC was still located in front of that wing, in '84 we took the rest of that, in front of the building, we took it all, not the entire wing, but about half of the occupied. now we are at about 19,000 square feet.

INT: What changes are you responsible for?

MK: Changes, of course what we are talking about now, is the physical part of the building to be responsible for the evaluating the square footage of the ? and as soon as, one thing Dick Harbor taught me is that as soon as your done with one renovation you start planning for your next one even though there is ten years in between. A person needs to, a manager needs to engage what the ? assignment is and determine if you need to contract, or expand or what are space needs are. That all will be dictated by what happens inside the store. The various sales departments some might be growing some might be shrinking some might be eliminated. and new ones might crop up. For example we are considering a computer department one where we will feature computer hardware. If we had other departments that we wanted to add to the store without reducing any of the existing departments we have to have more space. So that might be something we have in the plans for the future. We are also looking at reducing the textbook department. in the future. As the technology allows there might be a reduced need for the physical textbooks we have today. We get the information through computer through CD Rom or distance learning or whatever. They have textbooks to purchase for a semester and so might have a space on campus to strengthen the store. Those are the things to be concerned about ? way out. Other changes on the problem would be the mix of the merchandise things. We are always looking for new lines new merchandise. That doesn't mean, I told you before I am not a buyer, probably would be involved with that though I would identify new lines for the store. I am going to a trade show next month, I will see a lot of new things, bring back ideas, possible contacts for the merchandise. That is important,

real important function to keep the merchandise fresh and new. Society today changes so fast. The family, the styles change so quickly, new technology changes so quickly we need to be, actually need to have the newest and latest to maintain strong sales. Those are two most important changes or quality changes. I guess that if you want to look at change closely, so many things that change, the staff for example, for so long, changes the main person in the hiring scheduling the changes.

INT: Can you tell me who hired you?

MK: Dick Hubbard(?).

INT: okay. what do you believe are the book stores best qualities.

MK: I would have to say the staff. We are very fortunate to have administration that has really given us free reign to develop a good quality bookstore here. They appreciate I think a good store. A lot of colleges around the country they haven't really given there store an opportunity to really excel. But our administration has. Our staff is probably larger and more experience than most bookstore staff. Most of them try to hold the cost down and hire more students for the staff in important areas. I don't have anything against students, we got 16 students that we hire here. But on a part time basis with limited retail background, limited merchandising product knowledge, just not going to give the service to a customer that a full time person that has been around for a long time that knows the product. Our staff I think is wonderful, good folks here. They have been around awhile and we have trained them in customer service, they develop there own product knowledge, they are delivering the type of service I like to see. And the results from the sales are there, results are there to support our staff. We have 12 full time staff there. Typically a college bookstore on an average would have anywhere from 5 to 8 for a store our size.

INT: Do they hire academic backgrounds as well?

MK: we have quite a few people that have bachelors degrees on our staff. Our newest person she will start next Monday, we stole her from Yonkers, she has 17 years of experience, she has a bachelors degree from Northern, Magnum Cum Laude, those are the qualifications she will bring with her. But today retailing the technology involved with computer systems, inventory systems, I need people that are well trained.

INT: Is there anything you find dissatisfying?

MK: with the job or the store

INT: with the store

MK: I have been in the business for 22 years and had an opportunity to work in an environment that wasn't like this, so it

is hard for me to be critical. In the years past, I was forced to change from everyday operations to what we call "book rush" which occurs the first week of the semester. Where we would have to spend hours on Saturday when the store was closed moving things around getting things in that mode, now I don't have to do that the store is large enough and more accommodating. We have room for all of our checkouts and cash registers we don't have to move our displays and make room for our additional checkouts. We use to have to do a lot of inconvenient things, we used to have to pull our customers through inconvenience because of our small and older store. I really appreciate with what I have now, it is hard for me to be critical. If I did, if I had to find something to be critical on I would say that once you get large as we are, that cozy smallness is not there, and staff is more spread out and more difficult for each of them to communicate with each other. To back each other up. For example in the past one of the lady in the general book department would watch the cash register line from her desk. And once she saw a line develop she would go out there and take an extra cash register and knock that line down. Now the store is so large she can't see that line. So we have had to hire additional staff to make sure that those lines are always kept down. And that is an expense, a problem. So there are always plus's and minus's when you go through renovation or expansion, we are very fortunate. We have a large ?, most college bookstores are cramped. This is one of have ?? especially for the first college semester, ?? lot of students come through here at one time.

INT: Okay, what is the book and ? collection like, has it improved in the last few years, or has it been ? imagine that it has gone up. But if you can tell me a little about that.

MK: Textbooks are pretty well fixed. They are selected by the faculty. Our space is adequate for that, the past it was more cramped, more of a customer service problem. More than anything else. The area where expansion really helped is the with the ? course books that we call general books, books that are not required for class. We have a lot more room for those books plus we don't have any stuck in hidden areas in the store right in the middle of the store. Visible from the main aisle that goes down the middle of the store we seen since we moved here, nice increases in that area, we are running a 3.1 percent increase this year and last year we had a greater than 19.9 percent increase last year. First four years in that ?? store. I think that is important, we are called a bookstore and that is what our priority is and are more to books than just textbooks and we are happy to have the space. And beautiful surroundings to display the books, reference books, children's books particularly do well, promotional books that we bring in, at a good price, on every different subject. So following our mission to provide an educational product. Renovation, through work to force to meet that objective. In the supplies area school supplies, office supplies, art supplies we are I believe were about the same space we had before, maybe a little bit more space, more organized, better laid out nice prominent area.

INT: Okay, if you can tell me anything about the prices. You said you discuss the prices and stuff. Do you have complaints about the high prices of the books and stuff.

MK: I think it is a universal complaint around all college campus's about the price of textbooks. It would be hard, it would be an argument I think, or a good discussion whether the prices are justified for the materials or product that is offered. It is a very subjective thing are our textbooks priced to high or they not? I don't have an answer to that, I do know though that we keep the price down as low as we can, and all college book stores do, the mark up or the margin on textbooks is lower than any other product in the store. They usually run between 20-25 percent. If you compare that to any other merchandise like clothing which might be 50 percent mark up, our gifts like 50 percent, then you can see bookstores aren't really price gouging textbooks. The price of the textbooks are set by the publisher, based on the manufacturing costs, royalties, the marketing ? they need to inject in the book itself.

INT: You commented on keeping the clothing up to date, because of the changing demands and such is that just better sales or just to keep the customer happy.

MK: Right. All retailing that is the key. In order to keep your merchandise fresh, have it up to date, in order to keep your sales high. In all retailing whether it is a college bookstore or not. A lot of stores dropping out of business one of the reasons they don't have the product that the customer wants. Customer's desire's you demand are changing constantly.

INT: Are there any future plans for additions or anything major. that is going to go on pretty soon.

MK: We just renovated. We should start planning for the next one as soon as the first one is done. I do have some notes about some things we might of done differently. When we went through this authorization, most of them are minor. Like replacing a window, moving a service counter here or there, maybe less space for cash registers, more lockers. But I don't have any major ones at this point. The one thing I will be looking at very closely and watching is the textbook itself, that is the main reason a people come to the college bookstore is to buy their textbooks. and the interest in seeing in the future how and in what means the information is going to get to the student. Will it be through the traditional textbook or will it be through other means. And the business for other means, will the college bookstore be part of the distribution network. If things do change drastically for the textbooks we don't need all that space out there for those big calculus books or nursing books that we will have on ? CD's. We will have to consider using our sales floor space, either allocate it for something else or shrink the bookstore, or turn it into a gift shop.

INT: okay, is there anything else you want to tell me, that is all the questions I have for you.

MK: I didn't prepare much for this thing. I really wrecked ??? I didn't really intend to talk about textbook prices, student buy back is usually what I deal with. ????

INT: Okay. Buy back, how that works.

MK: yes, going back, maybe I should go back historically how that process, one of those areas developed ?, I started back in the '70's. I would guess that less than 10 percent of the student body sold there textbooks then. Either because they didn't know about it or they didn't see a value in selling a textbook. so it wasn't until we first remodeled that I was involved with it in 1973. The student buy back really took off. What we did we installed a window access from the outside hallway, to the textbook office, we were able to do student buy everyday when we were open instead of just at the end of the semester. Or once and awhile. That opportunity was a source of income to help them during the semester to help them pay there telephone bill, doctor bills, or what ever bills they had accumulated. That is when things started to take off, the buy back just started ?. Today rather than buy for three days or five days with one buyer, we buy for eight days and bring in four buyers. To handle all of our students. It is not because we have more students actually we probably smaller today, students count is lower than late '70's or '80's. That is because more and more students are selling their books. We got some courses like Psych 100 and intro math courses where about 60 percent of our students purchase books are extra stock. Less than 10 percent participating to around 60 percent of student body not participating in the buy back program.

INT: How is it determined how much money they get back.

MK: we have two practices. we need a book for Northern something that we know is going to be used here and aren't overstocked on it and it is a current edition. We will pay 50 percent of the new price. If it is a book that we do not need, we will quote a wholesale price based upon the national market. We deal with ten used book wholesalers that serve the national market. And we use one of the catalog and the book isn't demand on the national market, we will offer a wholesale price for it and that price is usually anywhere from 10 to 40 percent of the new price. We will ship those books to that wholesaler and they will hopefully find another school that need it and resell it or recycle it. Then we sell our used books at 25 percent of the price and we buy them at 15 percent of the used price.

INT: anything else.

MK: oh there are a lot of things, I will think of them after you are gone.

INT: okay, if I think of something can I come back someday?

MK: I will get some pictures.

He was showing pictures and talking but it was background talking and I could not make out what he was saying. He was not talking into the microphone.