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## Entrepreneur turns page, adds bookstore to career

To those who know him, it's really no surprise that Dennis Erokan decided to buy into his town's bookstore earlier this month, simply because he likes the vibe there.

It's no surprise, either, that Erokan has big plans for Lafayette Book Store. More author events, book fairs, expansion into other towns that don't yet have neighborhood bookstores, and above all, honing that vibe to perfection and duplicating it.

It's especially no surprise to Erokan himself, a voracious reader with a goal of 30 books a year, who says he couldn't bear it if the owner sold it outright.

After all, Erokan has always gone after what he wanted.

As a high school freshman in San Jose, Erokan was assigned to write a paper on his career plans. He approached his teacher and said, "I want my occupation to be Dennis Erokan." The teacher said "no." Erokan pleaded, because he had so many interests at the time. He loved astronomy and journalism. He wanted to be a musician.

The teacher said, "That's really fascinating, but you need to come up with an occupation." So Erokan wrote his paper on journalism, which came in handy when he started BAM (Bay Area Music) magazine a decade or so later, as well as nine other publications since then.

But now he's succeeded in his original plan. No longer a publisher, he's now a musician,

playing bass guitar with the Delta Dogs, which has gigs all over the Bay Area.

Even the astronomy idea worked out, though it took a different turn. The stars Erokan are more likely to watch are his friends Huey Lewis, Sammy Hagar, Carlos Santana, Chris Isaacs, Greg Kihn and many more, whom he knows from the 25 years he's spent producing the Bay Area Music Awards (now the California Music Awards).

The admiration shines both ways.

"Few guys have Dennis' kind of energy and enthusiasm to keep a magazine and the Bammies going all those years," says Hagar. "I almost think he singlehandedly has kept the Bay Area music scene in the public's eye." It's possible Erokan is one of the most consistently enthusiastic entrepreneurs around. A big man, with thick graying curls, he has a perpetual smile of interest on his face. He is what they call a "positive listener," nodding with animation as people talk. His eyes are kind and warm.

He's a family man, one who has never kept his children separate from his work.

"Life with my dad was more fun than you can imagine," says Darcy, 22. "We all totally lucked out with my mom and dad. Besides all the great stuff that came with his job, he totally included us. He took us to concerts and introduced us to all the rock stars." Dennis Erokan had a colorful childhood himself. His Boston-born Greek-American mother arrived 8 1/2 months pregnant to join her Turkish naval-officer husband in Istanbul, and, during their first reunion hug, learned from his whisper that her name would from now on be "Anita" instead of "Athena": It was against the law for Turkish military officers to marry Greeks.

The couple had met when Erokan's father, from a privileged Istanbul family, was living in Boston, getting degrees at Harvard and MIT. When Erokan was 6, the family learned they were in danger living in Turkey, in part because his mother's heritage had been discovered, and in part because of his father's liberal leanings.

However, the family had friends in high places, and because the Erokans were held in high esteem, a law was passed that enabled a man

with exactly his father's credentials to leave the military with honor.

"If you were 42 years old, and a Turkish naval commander, and you'd gone to Harvard and MIT, you could retire in the next six months," Erokan says, with a big smile. "So my dad and one other lucky son-of-a-gun retired. He just happened to have the same credentials as my father!"

Erokan, then 4, and his 2-year-old brother Johnny were taken on an extensive tour of Europe before settling in Boston. Eventually Erokan's engineer father got a job in San Jose, which in the early 1960s was little more than prune orchards.

"Women were driving pickup trucks. I'd never seen that before," Erokan recalls. "I was in a suit the first day of school, and the other kids were in jeans, which I'd also never seen before. I came home and told my mother, 'I want to try that.'"

In 1964, Erokan says, he went from wanting to be an astronomer to wanting to be in a band. The Beatles were a big influence, as was an uncle who had a jukebox company and handed off 45s by the hundreds, not only ensuring the Erokan boys' popularity at school, but also inspiring them to draw instruments on paper, cut them out, and dance around the room pretending they were playing them. Paper instruments eventually became real guitars, and in high school the boys started a band, Green Catherine, that lasted for about a decade. Johnny Erokan played lead guitar. Dennis, who played bass, was only in the band for about five years.

Johnny, who lives in Concord with his wife and two daughters, says the brothers were always close. "We were best friends," he says. "My dad wanted us to go to college, but we were far more into being musicians, and my mom was great with the music stuff." Music was a part of meeting his future wife. Dennis Erokan was 16 when he wandered into a folk-music-club meeting and saw a cute freshman reading his favorite music magazine, *Crawdaddy!* It took a year or so for Erokan to ask Lori for a date, but the two have been together ever since, and married for 25 years.

Lori went with Erokan to Boston when an uncle bought a restaurant and asked Erokan to run it. The couple returned to the Bay Area after the aunt fired them when she was having a bad day.

That's when they started BAM magazine. Lori typed all the copy, Dennis handled the business strategy. From a library book, he learned it would cost about \$2 million to start a magazine. "\$200,000 was for expertise, but I figured I already had that," he says. "The rest of the money was for marketing to convince people to pay \$1.98 for the magazine."

Erokan was stymied. Then he thought of something which at that point no one had tried; sell a bunch of ads to pay for printing, then give the magazines away free at record and music stores.

BAM debuted in January 1976 and made money from the first issue. In the early 1980s, Erokan began *Micro Times* when he realized baby boomers would be turning from music to high tech any minute. He used the same strategy as BAM: Give it away, and only put people, never stuff, on the cover. It, too, was a success. Among the faces was that of Erokan's old science-fair nemesis, Apple co-creator Steve Wozniak, "who won the science fair with his toy computer the same year my friend and I entered an electronic organ." *Micro Times* and BAM were Erokan's most successful ventures, but he gave up publishing in 2000. Some of the publications he founded are still in print, including *San Francisco Downtown* and *The Mix*. Others have failed, including *The Drive*, *Western Micro Market*, *Home Improvement and Design*, *The Rocket*, *Night Beat Newsletter* and *This Week*, an entertainment advertiser which was distributed in Contra Costa and lasted less than a year.

His biggest success, and easily his flashiest endeavor, continues to be the annual *Bammies* extravaganza, held every spring in San Francisco.

That's how he got to know Bill Graham, the late producer extraordinaire, though it wasn't easy. When Erokan, then 26, was trying to get the awards show off the ground, he knew he'd need approval from Graham. When the

powerful music czar refused to return his calls, Erokan was in a panic. It wasn't until Graham heard Erokan's idea being belittled by Bette Midler's arrogant manager one night backstage at Bimbo's ("What's next? A Cleveland music awards?"), that Graham stepped up, furious, and verbally thrashed the manager.

"He didn't know me at all, but Bill said, 'This fellow here is why the Bay Area is so great. He has a mania. He loves the Bay Area. I love the Bay Area.' He went on and on, then turned to me and said, 'Anything you want, you can have.'"

The two remained friends -- and Erokan considers Graham a mentor -- until Graham's accidental death in 1991.

**Erokan claims he got his business education as part of a group called the Alliance of Chief Executives, where CEOs share knowledge with each other. He's now a director of the group, and claims his participation led him to the bookstore opportunity.**

As an avid reader and member of several book clubs -- Erokan has been known to enthusiastically participate in discussions even when he hasn't read the book -- his buying a bookstore was perhaps a natural next step. He plans to combine the venture with his other interests. As an executive board member of the Diablo Regional Arts Association, and as a member of the advisory board of Town Hall Theatre of Lafayette, Erokan hopes to do more book events at theaters. He laughs at suggestions that Sammy Hagar do the opening act for, say, Gail Tsukiyama in conversation with Michael Chabon, but mention the idea and he gets a certain glint in his eyes and looks interested. Erokan, it seems, would never say "no" outright, perhaps because Erokan is not a man who takes "no" for an answer.

In his new capacity as co-owner of Lafayette Book Store, he'll do the marketing, while Dave Simpson, his fellow co-owner, handles day-to-day operations. The men have hired Kathleen Caldwell, formerly events coordinator at Bonanza Street Books and more recently at Reader's Books in Sonoma.

In the course of conversation Erokan twice mentions ice cream entrepreneurs Ben & Jerry as having a specific kind of vibe that made them successful.

"Most bookstores don't have that, but Lafayette Book Store does. It has an attitude. People think I sound like an idiot when I say that, but it's really the way I feel.

In the next few years Erokan's job, he says, will be to burnish that vibe, with the help of the other team members. When asked to describe that particular vibe, he says just one word which, when you think about it, is the best word to describe Erokan himself.

It's "fun."