

Los Angeles Times

Bookseller, barber and 'genius' Rueben Martinez finds new partner

October 29, 2012 By Hector Tobar



Rueben Martinez, founder of the Liberia Martinez Bookstore, sits in a barber... (Jeanine Hill for Chapman...)

Rueben Martinez was a steelworker first, and then a barber, before he became the book maven he is today. Raised in Arizona, and later employed at the long-gone Bethlehem Steel plant in Maywood, he later opened up

a barbershop in Santa Ana and gathered a few books for his customers to read while they waited to get haircuts.

That informal barbershop lending library grew to become Libreria Martinez in the early 1990s, a bookstore built around Martinez's large collection of, and love for, Chicano/Latino literature and history. In 2004, the MacArthur Foundation recognized his contribution to literacy and Orange County's Latino community with one of its "genius grant" fellowships.

Anyone who operates an independent bookstore will tell you it's tough going, but Martinez stayed afloat for a long time all on his own. It became a de rigueur stop on the Latino literary circuit, with all sorts of luminaries stopping by for readings over the years, including Isabel Allende, Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto and Rudolfo Anaya.

Now, it won't be so hard. Martinez has a new partner: nearby Chapman University.

"One major difference is instead of one *cabeza* [head] we now have many *cabezas* contributing to the success of the store," Martinez told The Times.

The newly renovated store on Broadway in Santa Ana was rechristened "[Libreria Martinez de Chapman University](#)" on Saturday at a ceremony attended by Santa Ana Mayor Miguel Pulido, Chapman University President James L. Doti and Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (D-Anaheim) among others, along with "lots of our loyal customers," Martinez said.

Libreria Martinez has always been an essential O.C. cultural institution. Now it's a "non-profit education venture" in alliance with Chapman University, which will help organize literacy and tutoring programs at the store. All profits will be funneled back into educational programs at the store, the university said.