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Chapman partners with barber-librarian

Revamped Librería Martínez offers literacy programs, events for all ages



Ruebén Martínez greets friends at the grand opening of the Librería Martínez de Chapman University Saturday in Santa Ana. Martínez, who started his bookstore in 1993 as part of his Santa Ana barbershop, has partnered with Chapman University, which will assume responsibility for the bookstore's operations as a nonprofit.

PAUL RODRIGUEZ, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

[.By JAIMEE LYNN FLETCHER](#) / THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

SANTA ANA – It started with a barbershop and a bookshelf and has grown into an educational endeavor that engages a community and inspires a want for higher education.

Santa Ana barber-turned-community activist Ruebén Martínez has partnered with Chapman University to open Librería Martínez de Chapman University at Broadway and Third Street.

A grand opening was held Saturday to introduce the community to the revamped nonprofit bookstore and educational center that offers literacy programs and low-cost reading materials for the community.

The bookstore was previously named the Librería Martínez and Art Center, which opened in 1996 on Main Street and moved several years later to the Broadway location.

Although the library isn't new, the partnership between the school and Martínez will mean a refreshed vision and an expanded reach in the community.

"This is a civic engagement," Martínez, 72, said. "(These students) are smart and they have that drive. We want to show them that we will listen to them and respect them."

New signage, redesigned classrooms and fresh paint on the walls welcomed visitors Saturday, and they browsed shelves of books offered in Spanish and English while a mariachi band provided background music.

Many who visited applauded the university and congratulated Martínez on the new venture.

"(Martínez) has provided a connection between groups in the community; he is a community liaison," said David Dobos, a retired sociology professor from Santa Ana College. "It's about transition. The people who come here get to see what's next."

Martínez said he hopes the students who visit the bookstore and take advantage of its programs will see that college should be what's next in their lives.

The new Librería will provide programs for preschoolers, tutoring, literature groups and art clubs, among others. Educating and involving parents will also be a focus that Martínez said is integral for success in the community.

"We don't care where they go (to college), we will help them," he said. "And we want to work with the parents. That's 50 percent of the battle."

Maria Solis Martinez said she looks forward to the added programs the library will offer.

As a mentor for young girls in middle school and high school, she uses the library to show them the importance of succeeding in school.

"I always bring my girls to Ruebén," the Anaheim resident said. "He always makes youth feel important and helps with their self-esteem. I am glad Chapman is partnering with him."

The roots of Martínez's program are not forgotten despite the new look and the new name.

A mural painted in the back corner of the wall shows Martinez in his barbershop, standing in front of shelves packed with books.

A barbershop chair is displayed in the corner next to a swirling barbershop pole.

Behind the display, hidden from view, is a small room with a black barbershop chair where Martinez still gives an occasional haircut.

"I loved cutting hair, it was how I sent my kids to college," he said. "But now I do that maybe once or twice a month."

His focus now is the library, he said.

"I've been doing this 21 years," he said. "I'm not going to slow down on that."

Martínez opened his first Santa Ana barbershop in 1975 and would lend out books to his clients to encourage literacy.

He carried magazines, newspapers and books in Spanish and English.

Sometimes they were returned to him and other times he re-purchased materials to keep his shelves stocked.

He bought "Burning Plain" by Juan Rulfo 15 times from a Tijuana bookseller.

"I was told, you're a fool if you loan a book but you're a bigger fool if you return it," he said.

At the encouragement of the Tijuana bookseller, Martínez opened his own bookstore.

He started with his first order of five books. They were sold out in a day, he said.

Within six months, his orders were up to 100 books.

"I am just a lover of words," he said. "The more words you use, the more you read and wisdom falls in there somewhere."

His operation grew larger, but Martínez said he was struggling to keep his bookstore open in the last several years.

Chapman stepped in and offered a partnership – it would help raise funds for a revamped store and Martínez would donate his collection of books and other materials.

Chapman University announced in September that it would take over operations of the bookstore and partner with Martínez as the director.

Martínez is a presidential fellow for the university who has worked to recruit first-generation Latino students for Chapman for about three years. He was also granted an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters last year.

He said he is thankful for the partnership because it serves a community that, if not engaged and encouraged, can be easily lost.

"We are rich in the heart," he said. "We have goals, we have visions (and) we have dreams."

Staff writer Ron Gonzalez contributed to this report.

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Ruebén Martínez, center, cuts the ribbon for the grand opening of Librería Martínez de Chapman University Saturday morning. Joining him were from left, Doy Henley, vice chair of Chapman University's Board of Trustees; Santa Ana Mayor Miguel Pulido; James Doti, president of Chapman University; and Donald Cardinal, dean of Chapman's College of Educational Studies.

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Chase Dodd, 9, of Long Beach checks out some of the selections of books available at the grand opening of Librería Martínez de Chapman University Saturday in Santa Ana.
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Chapman University President James Doti chats with Ruebén Martínez, founder of Librería Martínez. Martínez and Chapman University have partnered to open Librería Martínez de Chapman University, in which the university will assume responsibility for the bookstore's operations as a nonprofit.
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T-shirts that promote the new Librería Martínez de Chapman University were for sale at the grand opening of the new nonprofit venture between Chapman University and Ruebén Martínez.
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Victoria Carbajal, 12, right, reads a book to her sister, Clara, 5, at the new Librería Martínez de Chapman University. The bookstore held its grand opening Saturday to celebrate the collaborative effort between Chapman University and Ruebén Martínez.
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Santra Espinoza looks for a book at the Librería Martínez de Chapman University in Santa Ana. The bookstore held its grand opening Saturday to celebrate the nonprofit collaborative effort between Chapman University and Ruebén Martínez. The effort will allow the bookstore to offer expanded educational programs.

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Becky Campbell, center, and Jennifer Heatley, right, of Chapman University help a customer with a purchase Saturday at the grand opening of Librería Martínez de Chapman University.

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