

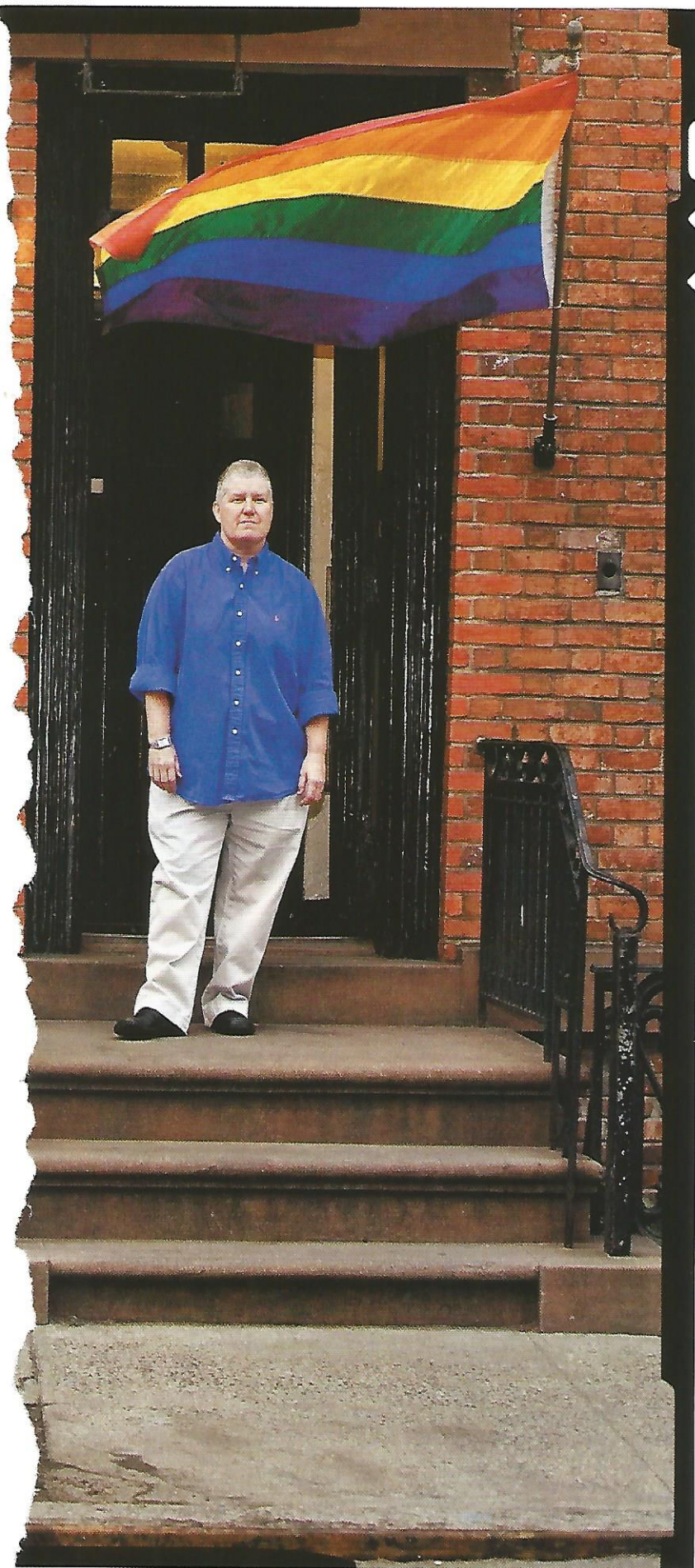


Oscar
Wilde
Memorial
Bookshop
Est. 1967

FORTY-YEAR-
OLD PIONEER
BOOKSTORE
OSCAR WILDE
CLOSES A CHAPTER
IN GAY HISTORY.

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A FOND FAREWELL



Founded in 1967, the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, the oldest gay bookstore in the country, is shutting its doors. For the last three years Kim Brinster (left), a friendly, optimistic, always welcoming presence and a former letter carrier, has done everything in her power to sustain the ailing enterprise, located in New York's Greenwich Village. Now, like so many other small bookshops, it's being driven out of business by Barnes & Noble and Amazon.

The original owner, Craig Rodwell, opened the store on Mercer Street and transferred it to its present location a few years later. Rodwell was a crabby guy who refused to carry books he didn't consider politically correct. For a long time he banned pornography on the same grounds, but he eventually he gave in on that score. Despite his permanent frown and flash-point bad temper, he was a founding father of gay liberation who helped organize the first Stonewall parade in 1970.

With no more gay bookstores left in this vast city, we can ask what purpose they ever served. Well, they were places where gay men and women could mingle in a context that had nothing to do with drinking. Since so many lesbians and gay men have a problem with alcohol, that alone was an attraction. For years, gay bookstores also served as informal community centers. The basement of the now-defunct Different Light Bookshop on West 19th Street welcomed all kinds of gay and lesbian groups and hosted many readings. Bigger bookstores might reject small-press authors, but the gay bookstores were always welcoming. Over the years I've done many signings and readings at Oscar Wilde, for instance, and if only my closest 15 friends showed up, they looked like a crowd in the tiny store.

At one point there were 75 gay bookstores in the country. Now there can't be more than 10. For a gay writer they were a great institution, in part because they kept old and out-of-print titles in stock. Even the biggest chains keep books on hand only for a few months in most cases—after all, they're stores, not libraries. But the gay stores remained loyal to their authors and proudly displayed all their titles. The advantage for the browser was the opportunity to discover books through serendipity that he or she might never have heard of; on Amazon, by contrast, one pretty much has to know in advance what he or she is looking for.

Oscar Wilde had a good cabinet of antiquarian books on gay and lesbian themes. It carried porn and gay mysteries and young adult fiction and books in every genre and category. When gay bookstores first sprang into existence in the late '60s and '70s, there were so few LGBT titles that they could all be put on a few shelves, which even so needed to be padded out with general studies of sexuality or books by gay authors that weren't about gay life (Somerset Maugham's or E.M. Forster's, for instance). By the mid '80s the number of gay titles was booming and even a large store like Lambda Rising in Washington, D.C., was crowded with old and new books.

Kim Brinster, with her warm smile and straightforward manner, will be missed. One of the institutions of New York gay life—small in size but mighty in importance—has vanished from the scene. ■