

Interview with: Eموke B'Racz  
Interviewers: Michelle Rabell and Joe Grady

Originally from a village about 10 miles from Budapest, Hungary, B'Racz made her way to Asheville, North Carolina, where, for the past 25 years, she has been successfully living out her dream of owning and running a bookstore.

But this isn't just any bookstore. Malaprops is eccentric, like its owner, and the name she chose for this small business that would soon capture and help to create an essence of what has come to be Asheville's culture and lifestyle.

First of all, the name: Eموke B'Racz (E-MOH-Kah BAH-raz), was named by her Hungarian mother after Atilla the Hun's favorite concubine in an historical novel.

B'Racz is a humble pioneer. By creating what was then one of the sole businesses on the block, she helped lead the way to today's thriving downtown Asheville. She comes across as tranquil, dedicated, strong, and serious. From her words and gestures, however, she exudes a dry humor and poetry. Her voice is soft, but influential.

B'racz arrived in Asheville in 1980, with her partner at the time. She took a liking to the grassroots organization in Asheville that successfully fought down a \$40 million proposal to replace part of downtown with a sprawling shopping mall. Between this, the backdrop of the mountains, and the world famous architecture, she decided to stay. She soon found a job at an organic farm in Leicester.

June 1, 1982, with \$10,000 and no financial backing, she and her partner opened Malaprops. At that time downtown Asheville seemed almost abandoned. "But every city deserves a good bookstore," she said. Today she has a staff of 54. In 2000, Publisher's Weekly named Malaprops "Bookseller of the Year," and B'Racz was a finalist for the 2007 Small Business Leader of the Year award.

But it hasn't been all poetry and literature. As a female entrepreneur owning a business, B'Racz felt traces of discrimination. She encountered denials for even small loans from banks despite her excellent record and immediate success as a new business owner.

Without loans, she said, the financial challenges are always there for a cash flow business. So B'Racz focuses on her staff and, in turn, her customers. "How we treat our customers and how much they choose to be here is the key."

B'Racz would come to realize that in giving up medical school, and pursuing what she loved - books, reading, writing - that she was, in fact, practicing a form of medicine. She and her staff strive to connect people with the books they may benefit from reading depending on their needs, or we might say ailments, much like a doctor would prescribe a medicine or treatment for a patient.

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Over the years she's made an effort to represent topics that tend to be "shut out" in small towns. She has a large selection of gay and lesbian literature and poetry, as well as international literature. This versatile selection, she claims, helped the business a great deal by attracting poets both as presenters and audiences.

As a business leader, B'Racz holds strong opinions about our community. She sees Asheville at the mercy of our city planners and recognizes that we are at a pivotal point. She worries that skyscrapers and chain stores will change what our city is about. "It will change," she says with gravity. "But People from all over the world come here because Asheville is the way it is. If you want to live in Charlotte, go live there, but Asheville is different."

She hopes to see Asheville leaders protect the architecture and support the people who founded and revitalized this town. These people, she says, are disappearing due to rising rents. "A good thing to an extreme is bad," she says. "Fast growth is deadly, just like cancer in the human body." She'd like to see our leaders consciously slow down, follow through on Asheville's necessities, and encourage developments that benefit the people and small businesses.

B'Racz will tell you that we need public restrooms downtown. She'll also let you know that "people need to realize that \$.60 for an hour's parking is nothing in the real world. If people are looking for easy parking, they probably need to go to the mall. But if they're shopping for quality and diversity, they probably have to walk three blocks."

To potential community leaders of the future she says, "Don't be so comfortable; consider the impact you have; what and how you drive; where you spend your money; what you're supporting..."

She considers her active role in the community to be "running the best small bookstore for this community. That takes all my waking moments." She has served on several boards in the past, but questions their effectiveness, "it's a lot of talking and not a lot of doing." She feels that her time needs to be focused on the store.

When asked for three words that best describe her, she says, "work as art." The advice she has followed all her life is simple, "Do what you love".

"I'm doing this for myself. I'm very lucky and very thankful - the community seems to like this standard. I feel that the integrity, the honesty, the flexibility that we have created here is important and they want to be part of it."

Her wish for the future? For men not to be afraid of women and for women not to be afraid of themselves."

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Besides owning Malaprops, B'Racz translates poetry, writes her own poetry, travels, and paints. For herself, she sees a future of more painting, more poetry, more bookselling. Retire? "If I lose my mind," she says with a smile.

The name Malaprops comes from a play, *The Rivals*, by Richard Sheridan. One character in the play, Mrs. Malaprop garbles words, saying, for example, "You are such an extinguished gentleman, instead of you are such a distinguished gentleman." A "malapropism," therefore, has come to mean the incorrect use of a word by substituting a similar-sounding word with different meaning, usually with comic effect.

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