



# Greg Giezentanner - Every story, every person deserves a second chapter

When Greg Giezentanner opens a box of donated books, he sees more than pages; he sees possibilities. He's spent his life proving that every story — and every person — deserves a second chapter.

August 30, 2025 by Dustin Staggs



Once upon a time, a young landscaper with a degree in horticulture began storing old hardbacks, first in closets and then filling up his garage, before hauling boxes full to a flea market booth at Country Classic Antiques in Tontitown. He and his wife were among eBay's first "Shooting Stars," selling rare and collectible titles online when most people thought the internet was just a fad.

Twenty-five years later, that side project evolved into a fairy tale story of its own: Once Upon A Time Books, a family business with three brick-and-mortar stores, two warehouses and a bookmobile that aspires to be a regional force for readers and schools throughout Arkansas.

The man at the heart of it, founder and owner Greg Giezentanner, would much rather talk about the books than about himself.

And when Giezentanner speaks about the business, he does so not using "I" and "me," but instead "us" and "we." He doesn't think of it in singular terms and as a one-man operation but more like his family of book-loving operators, using "we" so often you could miss that he started the whole thing.

"I think that he sees something more in these books than I think some people can," says his youngest brother, Lee Giezentanner, who contributed in those early stages of the business. "When you have a few thousand books passed through your hands each day, it's easy to say, 'Oh, this doesn't have any value.'

"One thing Greg can do better than just about anybody is find where there's a home for books."

## **THE RHYTHM OF THE WORK**

On a July morning, Greg covers warehouse operations while his son, Andrew Giezentanner, takes a rare vacation.

He begins with processing in the Tontitown warehouse, wearing an ice vest to manage his dysautonomia, a heat-regulating disorder that makes Arkansas summers a daily challenge. He addresses colleagues by name and points out their specialty, barely missing a beat even as he swaps ice packs and moves large piles of books.

Every job in the hot, stuffy bustle that is the Tontitown warehouse (the smaller of the two), Giezentanner used to do. And then he trained somebody on certain things. And then they trained others.

“But because I’m in this building, they (including his own son) have to put up with my thoughts too,” he says with a grin.

He shows off the grid, a system he created about seven years ago when they opened their first bookstore in Tontitown to direct every title to the appropriate destination.

“So the goal has always been to know what to do with every book that comes in,” he continues. “And we’ve done that. I mean, nothing stumps us.”

By midday he’s heading over to the larger Siloam Springs warehouse.

Inside the office, a framed Elton John poster sits by the entrance. Giezentanner jokes about being a “famously known” Elton doppelganger, accompanied by a few anecdotes about being mistaken for the Knight Bachelor himself.

Beyond the cool AC of the office side is the cavernous Siloam location. Tables and rows (and rows) of shelves, from ceiling to floor, are brimming with organized stacks. This is where shipping takes place, and a smaller shopping section is available for customers to shop for books.

“We are in the recovery business,” he says, picking up a stack of children’s paperbacks to organize. “If there weren’t people like us doing what we do, a big, big chunk of the books we deal with would end up in the landfill.”

But Once Upon A Time Books recycles and gives away what they can’t sell. By Giezentanner’s math, that saves about 50,000 trees a year.

He says it lightly, like a fact among many. Numbers are his native language.

He estimates he’s touched roughly 35 million books and spent 80,000 hours on the craft. He references Malcolm Gladwell’s “10,000-hour rule,” saying it takes that amount of time to master a skill to perfection.

“So I’ve mastered it eight times over,” he says.

The pride rests behind the humility, like a good dust jacket on a book you intend to preserve.

“In order to be good at this and to have this passion, you have to know at least a little bit about a lot of things,” says Andrew.

## **‘BOOKSENSE’ AND THE TREASURE HUNT**

Ask his daughter, Allison Harrison, what keeps her father going, and she responds without hesitation, “It’s a giant treasure hunt for him.”

She grew up between garage sales and flea markets, Archie Comics in hand and watching her parents' garage fill and then spill into their first Springdale warehouse, then a warehouse behind the family home, and then into their larger spaces. And finally into their three stores — Tontitown, the flagship; Bentonville, the condensed one with higher-end rare books; and Fayetteville, evolving from children's selections to family.

In January 2019, she came on board as general manager of Once Upon A Time Books. Her brother took over as head of operations in March 2021.

“Never in a million years would 10-year-old Allison and 7-year-old Andrew think we would be doing this,” Allison admits. “We would have said, ‘Heck no!’” But she says, “Here we are.”

Her favorite running joke isn't really a joke at all; around the business, Greg Giezentanner calls it “Booksense.”

A customer asks for a specific title that the store doesn't have. Minutes later, someone walks in selling a stack with the book on top. Employees frequently text Giezentanner those kinds of stories, like fish tales.

He lights up telling his own, “One day I was talking about Glen Campbell, working and talking, and I look down. I had a Glen Campbell book in my hand.”

Giezentanner is big on synchronicity, the phenomenon that helps explain why books — and opportunities — seem to surface at precisely the right moment.

“Quantum entanglement in any sense, that's my jam,” he says, and you believe him.

The idea behind synchronicity connects to the Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume, who believed everything had a reason to happen.

Hume also happens to be one of Giezentanner's answers to the three guests he'd want at his dinner party. It's a question he's patiently waiting to be asked. The other two guests are author C.S. Lewis and the celebrated humorist, actor and political commentator Will Rogers.

He quotes Rogers, "I've never met a man I didn't like," as both aspiration and operating principle.

"Greg the person is very caring of others," says his wife of 35 years, Cilinda Giezentanner. "He goes out of his way to try to make connections, not only with books, but with people. He's got a drive for the bookstore that's kept it going — that sense of purpose.

"He is just focused," she continues. "He has got some quirks about him that pay off. He checks numbers all the time. But he is a very genuine person. What you see is what you get. A lot of times he can maybe rub people the wrong way because he's so direct and to the point, but it's all just a matter of fact, because that's the way it is. No need in sugarcoating it really. But he's always trying to connect. I think that's the biggest thing."

Allison jokes that in the family fairy-tale version, her father's story would be "Rumpelstiltskin," the German fairy tale that introduces the man who spins straw into gold.

Giezentanner doesn't argue.

“Because that’s what we do,” he says. “We’re turning sow’s ears into silk purses every day.”

The Bentonville store, which contains the fullest expression of the top of the line at Once Upon A Time Books, is next on Giezentanner’s route on this July day.

Kali Hodson has been with Once Upon A Time since mid-May and helps manage the location. She’s getting to meet Giezentanner — the Oz behind the curtain — for the first time.

She points to Warja Honegger-Lavater’s symbol-only illustrated “Little Red Riding Hood” as her personal favorite in the entire store when Giezentanner asks. The unique book is exactly the sort of find that keeps customers coming back to Once Upon A Time Books and wandering out with something they didn’t know they needed.

## **THE MOMENT IT TURNED**

The family recalls the exact moment when Giezentanner’s pastime became his livelihood. It was an Alcoholics Anonymous book. This early find was a special seventh printing that proved to be rarer than first editions.

He was able to sell it online for about \$4,000, Andrew and his father say.

“And it was at that moment that my mom had to buy into it,” Andrew joked.

Before Cilinda got roped into this hobby-turned business of Giezentanner’s, she had to first be tricked by her college friend into thinking she and her were

going to get dinner. But actually Cilinda's friend set her up on a blind date with the man himself.

"Every time I see her, I thank her," Cilinda said.

Andrew and Allison both describe their parents as a great team and being co-dependent on books. Andrew says his mom has been "nails" and gone through a lot with his father.

Books aren't necessarily her passion, he says. Her passion is to be there for him.

But Giezentanner jokes that he "blames" the whole operation on her. "Because she's the one that wanted to open up the booth at Country Classics. And then she figured out how to sell on eBay."

"We started it together," Cilinda surrenders. "I definitely am more of the bookkeeper rather than the book person."

She can step in when needed, and she does. Shipping was her baby, she says.

"He pulls and I pull, and we kind of end up in the middle," she says of their workflow. And adds that they've "kind of" got a rule that if they're home, they're going to talk very little about the business. They try to keep it separate, but it's hard, she says. Giezentanner lives and breathes books.

From that first AA book, the growth was steady but never flashy.

"There is no tomorrow," is Giezentanner's motto, Andrew says.

“You take it today, and you see where today takes you, and then tomorrow you do the same thing,” Andrew continues. “There was no grand master plan. It was just, ‘This makes sense for now. Let’s proceed.’”

While both of his children were graduated and off pursuing chapters in their lives, Giezentanner opened the Tontitown store. That same year his mother was diagnosed with glioblastoma. He priced books between hospice visits, attempting to be, as Andrew puts it, “as good a son as possible” while keeping the lights on.

Initially, the store was minimal. The hours were long. He kept going.

“He doesn’t stop,” says Andrew. He recalls when he came back to Arkansas after graduating from the Air Force Academy and living in Alaska. He wondered how his father could possibly be running both the online business and opening up the store.

“Because he put in a ridiculous amount, a ridiculous amount of passion into it,” Andrew has come to learn. “There’s no other way.”

## **A STOREFRONT FOR PURPOSE**

Giezentanner turned 60 years old on July 3. He jokes about being “old now,” a little slower — down from 80-hour weeks to 50-plus — but his response to retiring is immediate.

“That would be absurd,” he said. “Why would I not want to come discover cool books every day?”

Him slowing down is going to Colorado on vacation. But even on those trips, he's going to be shopping for books, his wife says.

If he ever becomes "not usable," Giezentanner tells his family to wheel him into a corner with a box of books, specifically, the oldest ones they can find.

He speaks simply about faith — not as a marketing line but as a compass.

"There is a mission involved," he says. "I'm surrounded by all walks of life. And being someone of faith, the world I'm in is a mission field. And I'm not an overtly spiritual person. Anybody would tell you that. But anybody that knows me well knows that I do try to treat people as I would want them to treat me."

Success for him isn't a revenue target. Success for him, he says, is working with his family, doing something he looks forward to doing every day, and being a vital part of the community.

"Until I was each of those things, I didn't realize how valuable those things were," he admits. Because until he created Once Upon A Time Books, he says, "purpose was really centered around making money, right? Doing something meaningful — I just didn't know what that was.

"It's meaningful to work with your family," he has discovered. "It's meaningful to be part of your community. And it is meaningful in a spiritual and personally healthful way to do something that you enjoy."

That sense of purpose shows up most clearly in children's books. Volume is both a problem and an opportunity at Once Upon A Time Books. Over half a million kids' books are in the queue, Giezentanner says.

Which is why, following Allison's year of friendly pestering, the business bought a retired library bookmobile on eBay this spring. Those that attended the Washington County Fair might have seen the updated get-up parked over by the sale barn in all its glory. The idea is to raise funds through a nonprofit and continue to provide free books to children in rural and low-income schools.

Ruthanne Hill has directed three nonprofit organizations throughout the years and said she's an advocate for Once Upon A Time's mission. With her expertise, she's talked to Giezentanner to help them brainstorm ideas for how to partner with the right nonprofit.

She says she's known Giezentanner since the "dawn of time." More specifically, back when they attended Gravette School District together. Giezentanner had Hill's mother, Mrs. Ruby Robinette, as a math teacher and would later tell her to take whatever books she wanted when she came into the store.

Hill hadn't reconnected with Giezentanner until she directed the local Red Cross Chapter from 2006 to 2010, and the nonprofit was based right next door to the Tontitown bookstore.

When asked what qualities in Giezentanner she believes have been key to Once Upon A Time's success, she answers, that's a heart and mind question.

"Because he couldn't have succeeded this long and this well without a head for business. And that means a head for numbers," she explains. "But his heart — it's like his heart is as big as his whole inside. He knows he's got to make money and feed a family and raise kids and all of that. But he'll give books away. He'll sell them for next to nothing. He'll take them to schools.

“So both the heart and the head components have led to his success,” she says. “And I think personally, probably the bigger one of the two is the heart.”

## THE QUIET CENTERS

For someone who sometimes gets overheated and admits his memory “can get fuzzy,” Greg’s recollection of people is laser-sharp. He loves introducing staff by their name, strength and specialty. He lights up at a well-conditioned 1940s pulp and dismisses the notion of being a collector. He considers himself self-taught in this venture and prefers the older books — the ones that need a surgeon’s eye and a steady hand.

Giezentanner isn’t shy about saying he is the doctor but also doesn’t hesitate to give credit to this team of nurses and others who help him run the hospital.

If there is a thread running through this family’s journey, it is the notion that whenever they were ready to take the next step, something came along — a warehouse, a customer, a bookmobile at just the right price.

The family agrees that sometimes it felt as if God was stepping in to say, “Here you go,” when they were ready to take on more.

“This isn’t his; this is His,” Andrew says of his dad’s outlook. “I don’t think he’s necessarily had a plan. He’s just known that as long as he gets confirmation that this is working and it’s progressing, then this is what he’s supposed to be doing.”

Synchronicity. Booksense. Providence. Call it whatever you wish. It’s Once Upon A Time Books.

## **Self-Portrait**

**Born:** July 03, 1965 in Ponca City, Oklahoma

**I only read:** Nonfiction. I have read “Memories, Dreams and Reflections” by C.G. Jung twice. Besides the Bible, that is it. I generally have two or three books going at a time.

**I prefer:** Hardcover, but will read either. I prefer hardcover for anything I keep in my personal collection, but oftentimes a particular title that I want to put in my collection is only available in paperback.

**I am:** A morning person

**Easily, the most surprising thing I’ve found inside a book:** Two handwritten postcards from Julia Child.

**Always in my fridge:** Something pickled and blueberries.

**A hobby I love but aren’t great at:** I love playing golf, but I have never been a good player.

**Road trip snack of choice:** Salted mixed nuts.

**Best advice I’ve ever received:** My employer as a teenager, Foy Evans, told me, “There’s always an easiest way.” Nearly all of my employees have heard me pass that advice along at least once.

**Guilty pleasure TV show or movie: “Lord of the Rings” trilogy. They are just about the only movies I have seen more than once.**

---





*Support journalism that covers the topics that matter most to you. Donate today to preserve the quality and integrity of local journalism.*

## Dustin Staggs

[dstaggs@nwaonline.com](mailto:dstaggs@nwaonline.com)



Dustin Staggs is a features writer for the Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, where he covers arts, entertainment and community stories that showcase the vibrant culture of Northwest Arkansas. Dustin, a University of Arkansas graduate, joined the Democrat-Gazette features team in July 2024. During

his time at the university, Dustin's magazine story was named a Story of the Year finalist in the "In-Depth News Story" category by the Associated Collegiate Press, making him the only Arkansas college student to earn this recognition that year. At the Democrat-Gazette, Dustin has cultivated strong connections within the local arts and entertainment community and finds joy in spotlighting the creative talents and inspiring stories of the region.

## Popular Stories