



Allison Hill  
CEO of Vroman's Bookstore

## Back to School

**B**In a city that values tradition, Vroman's Bookstore, founded 1894, sits near the top of the list of Things That Must Be Maintained. It's more than a bookstore; Pasadena people count on Vroman's to keep the city civilized. That sense of mission might be what kept Vroman's afloat during the global recession and the Amazonian demise of bookstores all over the country, both chain and indie. Nowadays, when

publishing experts point to the new Bookstore Renaissance, the phenomenon of bookstores retuning to a vital and central part of a town's intellectual life, Vroman's makes that list, too.

Allison Hill, the CEO of Vroman's for the last 14 years, also has her eyes on history. "I think about it all the time. Mr. Vroman's standing in his little bookstore in 1894 in what was the Wild, Wild West of Pasadena and he could not have imagined this." She waves her hand to indicate the 32,000 square foot emporium that is Vroman's Colorado Boulevard

flagship store. "And then I think about 100 years from now. There's something really moving about being part of something that has this rich history, that might stand the test of time."

Allison Hill has been the CEO of Vroman's for the past 14 years, lured over from Book Soup ("A magical place.") where she had been the manager. Hill's responsibilities include running three stores—the main store, Vroman's Hastings Ranch and Book Soup in West Hollywood, acquired by Vroman's in 2009, much to Hill's delight. She's also



place.”) where she had been the manager. Hill’s responsibilities include running three stores—the main store, Vroman’s Hastings Ranch and Book Soup in West Hollywood, acquired by Vroman’s in 2009, much to Hill’s delight. She’s also the Vice President of Vroman’s Real Estate, a non-book related entity. Hill answers to a Board of Directors and shareholders, manages 200 employees, and negotiates strategic partnerships and contracts. She describes the business decisions as “complex.” This is not the sleepy, movie-version Notting Hill bookstore people fancy running.

The last five years have been the best in Vroman’s history, a testament to decisions Hill and her team have made. “You’re always thinking about how to move forward while honoring that sense of tradition. We wouldn’t be surviving and thriving if we weren’t constantly changing. It’s a balance.”

Significant changes include closing the stand-alone stationary store and folding the department into the main store; re-organizing and combining the paperbacks and the hardbacks (gasp!); working with her buying team on the product mix to find the balance between books and gifts; bringing Jones Coffee onboard at the flagship store to set the right tone and aroma; maintaining a robust calendar of over 1,000 events between the three stores; high profile off-site author appearances; licensing the Book Soup name for stores at LAX; and creating Vroman’s Ed, in-store writing classes. “The landscape has changed so dramatically over the last twenty years.

You just always have to be moving. n at

To that end, Hill, an English major at Tufts who had a minor in Peace & Justice Studies, took the plunge and enrolled in the Fully Employed MBA Program at UCLA Anderson School of Management in the fall of 2017. The schedule is demanding, weekend classes and seminars on financial policy and statistics after a full week of work. But Hill wanted to get out of her comfort zone and interact with other business leaders outside of the book biz, from tech to finance to entrepreneurs of all stripes.

Hill says she has a natural curiosity about business, picking up the phone and seeking answers to problems from new contacts. “But you still only reach for things that are comfortable. The book business is isolating and I was seeing everything through that lens.

I wanted to get out of my own head.” She said she needed to learn the new language of business to talk to bankers and investors to ensure that the Vroman’s legacy continues. It’s been an invigorating intellectual and creative experience, even if, as Hill says, “It’s humbling to sit down and take a three hours statistics exam as a book nerd.” Thanks to the conversations with her classmates and professors, she now walks the floor at Vroman’s and thinks, “What are our underutilized assets and how could I be monetizing them?” That’s a reach statement for a book nerd. And good news, Vroman’s fans. Hill’s answer to that question in two words: Wine Bar. ■

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