

# Vibrant past of Gary is not a best seller in today's city

By Lolly Bowean  
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Like many sons and daughters of Gary, when Kendall F. Svengalis reflects on his childhood in the once-bustling industrial city, he mainly remembers the good times.

There were trips to carnivals and wrestling matches and the theater. Playing with pals in a friendly, safe neighborhood in the city's Central District. Walks to Froebel School at a time when Gary public schools were considered innovative and a model for the rest of the country.

That was in the 1960s. Svengalis, a librarian, hasn't lived in his hometown in more than 35 years.

But it was with that nostalgic and romantic tone that he wrote and



Tribune photo by John Smierciak

**Susan Kallimani, an associate at Lake Street Gallery in Gary, shows a book that displays the city's glory days. Local buyers have been scarce.**

self-published a 450-page coffee-table book about his beloved hometown, "Gary, Indiana: A Centennial Celebration."

"Even though Gary's hit hard times, you don't lose your affection for the place," he said. "I was trying to remember Gary's better days

with a hopeful look that Gary could come back. I didn't want to use any pictures of decay... only what Gary was known for in its good days."

Svengalis has sold about 2,000

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copies of his heavy, hardcover book—about half of the 4,000 he printed. He's shipped copies all over the country to Gary expatriates, he said.

Yet, Svengalis' coffee-table collection of photos and text hasn't gotten much traction in his hometown.

At a local art gallery where the book is sold, it sits on the front counter, sometimes collecting dust.

"Everyone who buys the book likes it," said Susan Kallimani, an associate at Lake Street Gallery, the only place in the city where the book is sold. "But I guess people don't know it exists."

The tome is easily overlooked on the shelves of suburban Merrillville and Highland booksellers. None of the city's public schools owns copies.

And though it's often picked up at the local library and used as a reference, it can't be found in the homes of the everyday residents Svengalis was hoping to reach, he said. Even when he recently offered to donate a large part of the proceeds to a high school if students would peddle the book, there was barely a response. Despite local news stories and postings on the Internet, many residents have not seen the book.

Lalosa Dent Burns, a spokeswoman for Mayor Rudy Clay, said she wasn't sure if Clay would remember seeing the book. She herself had to think back to recall it.

"We haven't had an opportunity to really review the book," Burns said. "But I do recall it being a very wonderful pictorial presentation by the author."

With its sophisticated layout and graphics and refined presentation, the book is a contrast to the gritty city it



**Kendall Svengalis hasn't lived in Gary for more than 35 years, but he holds dear to childhood memories.**

salutes. Yet in some ways the dismal sales exemplify the struggles of Gary.

"It's not the same Gary" that's depicted in the book, community activist and long-time resident Nora Glenn said. "Things certainly aren't perfect, but it's still a good place to live."

The city was once home to good-paying jobs, a thriving downtown and manicured neighborhoods. But in recent years, Gary has been dogged by crime, corruption and struggling schools. Many residents fled to outer-ring suburbs, and major businesses closed up their buildings. Entire blocks have been abandoned.

Most residents are too busy dealing with the complexities of life to find inspiration in a picture book, Svengalis acknowledged.

"The economic base of Gary, I think, doesn't lend itself to large sales," he said. "A \$50 book just isn't attractive."

Svengalis was born in 1947 at Methodist Hospital on the city's west side. He spent much of his childhood in the Central District and Aetna sections of town. In 1965 he left to study at Purdue University, then went on to graduate school in Rhode Island. Like so many of his counterparts who left to study, Svengalis never returned to Gary to live.

He watched from afar as the city morphed into a new place. He settled on the East Coast, but the fond memories of his hometown stayed with him.

His father was born the year Gary was formally established: 1906. "I grew up hearing Gary's history," he said. "My dad took me to events, and he was very proud."

In 2000 Svengalis started plotting out his book and collecting photos and postcards for it. But it wasn't until 2005 that he seriously started working on it. It took 15 months to research and write the history that goes with all the photos.

He had to publish the book himself because it's about twice as long as most of the sleek books of its kind. Svengalis said he knew a book of its size would cost more, but felt he needed 450 pages to fully show the town in all its glory.

"I did it this size because of my love for Gary and my roots," he said. "Commercially, no one else would have done it."

The book was released about the time the city was celebrating its centennial in 2006. Svengalis tried to promote it, he said, and held a few small signings.

Kallimani wasn't going to buy the book but couldn't help it when she saw it, she said.

"At first I thought, 'Oh, \$50, that's a little expensive,'" she said. "Then I looked inside. I thought, 'Well, it's worth it.'"

It's understandable that younger generations can't relate to the book, Kallimani said. Though some memories recorded in it are only 30 or 40 years old, it seems like a lifetime ago, she said.

"I bet young people think it's always been this way," she said. "It's upsetting that the city is struggling and in a mess. Maybe if people knew more of our history, they would want to do more."

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