

Shelter publisher sells famed imprint

by Ben Stocking January 31, 2024

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Lloyd Kahn at his Bolinas home in 2017. (David Briggs / Point Reyes Light)

It's safe to say that most octogenarians who sell a successful company are ready to settle down. Most people aren't Lloyd Kahn.

A month after selling his boutique Bolinas publishing company, the 88-year-old Mr. Kahn is going surfing in

Mexico. He's driving down to Baja California—alone—in the four-wheel drive truck he's converted into a camper.

Mr. Kahn, who's been publishing books for 50 years under the imprint Shelter Publications, will keep telling stories. Defying the stereotype of technology-challenged seniors, he'll be communicating on Instagram, YouTube and Substack, an online platform for subscription newsletters.

What does he intend to communicate?

"Good news," he said. "Everywhere I go in the world, I see people doing things that are wonderful."

AdventureKEEN, an Alabama-based publishing group with seven imprints and over 1,000 titles, signed a deal to purchase Shelter at the end of last year. Mr. Kahn declined to disclose the price but said he was happy with the terms.

"They do books on hiking, nature and travel, so they're very compatible with us," said Mr. Kahn, who has authored or co-authored a dozen books.

Shelter's titles include several do-it-yourself books about carpentry, tiny homes, road rigs, houseboats, gardening—even a septic system owner's manual. There are also several books about sports, including "Stretching," which has sold 3.5 million copies worldwide.

In all, Shelter's books have been sold in 23 countries.

A former insurance salesman, Mr. Kahn began working as a carpenter in the 1960s, building post-and-beam houses and then geodesic domes, a topic upon which he became a leading authority. His domes were once featured in a two-page spread in Life magazine.

Mr. Kahn, who has since come to loathe geodesic domes because they are difficult to modify, became the shelter editor of the Whole Earth Catalog, a 1960s publication full of counterculture essays and product reviews that Steve Jobs once described as a sort of paperback version of Google before the internet existed.

In 1973, he co-authored a book called "Shelter," which has sold 300,000 copies. He lays out his publications in scrapbook style, printing out text and photos and taping them together on copy paper before sending them off to a friend who digitizes them.

Mr. Kahn's books have influenced more than one generation since he began writing them a half-century ago.

Mark Butler, a Bolinas woodworker, began reading Mr. Kahn's work back when he was writing for the Whole Earth Catalog. His house, which he constructed himself, is featured in one of Mr. Kahn's books titled "Tiny Homes: Simple Shelter."

"I have all of his books, and I've read every single one, page to page," Mr. Butler said. "He's truly inspirational. Every piece of wood in my home is recycled, and I can tell you where almost every piece came from. He showed that you can build a home from recycled materials and do it artistically."

Mr. Kahn intends to keep writing books, including a memoir about coming of age in San Francisco in the 1960s. But much of his energy will be focused on telling stories online about whatever he sees that excites him.

Mr. Kahn, who wears a gold hoop earring and took up skateboarding at age 65, is the youngest 88-year-old you'll ever meet. When he finds joy in the world, which he happens upon frequently, he wants to share it.

"I've had a compulsion to communicate ever since I was a kid," he said. "When I see something, I immediately want to tell people about it."

You can follow Mr. Kahn's road-trip adventures at <https://www.instagram.com/lloyd.kahn>