If the Book Buddies had a theme song, it could be James Taylor's hit “You've Got a Friend.” The semi-formal group of booksellers organized by Ron Rice, sales manager of Bookazine, and Eileen Dengler, executive director of the New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association, has so far convened twice at bookstores for a walk-through and store critique, followed by a lunch to talk through issues facing new booksellers and their stores.

“The group was formed with the idea of sharing concepts and techniques, as well as to foster friendships among booksellers and encourage a feeling of solidarity,” explained Rice. “It’s important on a grassroots level for local booksellers to talk to each other.” Donna Fell, who took over ownership of Sparta Books in Sparta, N.J., last November, received the first Buddies visit in February. It was, said Fell, “perfect timing.”

“When I bought the store, the previous owner just handed me the keys and said, 'phone if you have any questions,'” recalled Fell, “I was brand new to bookselling and owning my own business, so meeting the Book Buddies made me feel like I wasn't so crazy after all.”

One of the Buddies, Jason Rice, Bookazine buyer/sales rep, solicited publishers to provide marketing materials and posters on Fell's behalf. Others offered advice on everything from making best use of the ABA to how to host a story time for children. “It was the best experience I could have asked for,” Fell said.

The Book Buddies include booksellers, store owners and journalists, most of who work in the New York/Philadelphia/Washington, D.C., corridor. The second gathering of the Buddies took place June 13 at the recently opened Idlewild Books in New York City. Idlewild owner David Del Vecchio called the group “helpful and solution oriented,” and added, “We made numerous changes based on things they said, such as adding shelftalkers and some additional signage, and using smaller tables for displays.”

Rice intends to plan further Book Buddies outings in the future, though none are as yet scheduled. In addition, Rice would like to expand the program to other parts of the country, and has spoken with Wanda Jewell of the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance (where Rice is on the advisory council) about doing something further south.

Margo Sage-El, owner of Watchung Booksellers in Montclair, N.J., said what she most appreciates about her outings with the Book Buddies is the opportunity to pass along some of her own hard-earned wisdom: “When I first bought my bookstore, I worked in a vacuum, except for visits from publishers reps, who I would always bug for information about other stores. So my feeling about the Book Buddies is, if anyone can learn from my struggle, that’s great.”