



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Jason Low holds some of the books published by his company, Lee & Low.

# Lee & Low makes diversity the everyday

By Jackie Lupo

A moveable feast was arranged on the long dining table at Jason Low's home in Ardsley.

There was no food, but there were books, their covers illustrated with people in every shade of brown, yellow, red and white. There were stories about baseball players and farmers, inventors and entertainers, heroes and villains. There were books about families and friends, people struggling and people triumphing. These were books about everyone.

That's no accident. "About Everyone - For Everyone" is the slogan of the multicultural publishing house in Manhattan founded in 1991 by Low's father, Irvington resident Tom Low, with a fellow Chinese American, Philip Lee. They published their first title in 1993, at a time when there were only a handful of publishing houses run by minorities. Even now, the business remains one of just a few minority-owned book publishers in the U.S.

When Low's father started publishing, the mission was simple: to tell wonderful stories about all kinds of people. They have been so successful at it that their

customers now come from places with ethnically diverse populations... and places with no minorities at all. Their list includes about 700 books; around 15 new titles are added every year.

Low said he was so used to thinking of the company as a small, independent publisher that he had to adjust his thinking when he realized that in its niche, Lee & Low

is an industry leader. "We did a comparison with other multicultural publishers and multicultural imprints of large publishing companies, and found we have the most titles," Low said.

While diversity is always part of Lee & Low's criteria for selecting a title, "If you read

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# Lee & Low

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all these books as a collection, you'll find the multiculturalism and the ethnicity all fade away," Low said. "The books are about everyday people. When we acquire a story, it has to be a good story first. These stories can subtly break down barriers. You notice the universality of what we have in common rather than the barriers that keep us apart."

Over the years, Lee & Low titles have earned numerous awards, including the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belpré Award Honor, the Parents' Choice Award, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, and honors from the American Library Association, the American Booksellers Association, and Bank Street College, along with a wide range of praise in the media, from *The New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* to *Kirkus Reviews* and *Smithsonian* magazine.

As publisher, Jason Low now works alongside his brother, Craig, who is president of the company. The Low brothers, both of whom graduated from Irvington High School, joined their father in the family business about 15 years ago; today, Tom Low takes a less active role, and co-founder Philip Lee has retired from the company.

"In the beginning, the company was very much a trade publisher, but we had a passionate following in schools and school libraries," said Jason Low. "We asked, 'Who are our core customers?' Our customer base was heavily weighted toward educators." They made the strategic decision to concentrate on that market rather than retail.

"It really did save us from a lot of turmoil that happened when the superstores took over the book business," Low added. Publishers who sell to libraries and educational institutions fill orders and get paid for those books on a no-returns-accepted basis. In

contrast, when a superstore such as Barnes & Noble buys a book, they pad their shelves with multiple copies of a book, but they return most of them later.

"We couldn't work under that system, being a small business," Low said. "It would have wreaked havoc with our cash flow." On the other hand, he said, in the education market, "They buy what they need and keep it." A small percentage of sales is made through booksellers, and consumers can buy any title online through the company Web site ([leeandlow.com](http://leeandlow.com)).

Lee & Low's catalog for educators and librarians presents materials on a variety of reading levels, and includes books to be read by students who are not native speakers of English. Many of the books include material that meshes with language arts and social studies curricula. In January of this year, they strengthened their place in the bilingual market, buying the assets of Children's Book Press, one of the first multicultural publishers.

"The art is really wonderful, the stories are great, and they are bilingual in English and Spanish," Low said. Storybooks from Lee & Low's own imprints do not have text in two languages, since the illustrations, each one a work of art in itself, take up a signifi-

## A multicultural feast

Here's a taste of Lee & Low's multicultural menu:

**"The Mangrove Tree: Planting Trees to Feed Families"** by Susan L. Roth and Cindy Trumbore, illustrated by Susan L. Roth.

The true story of a Japanese scientist, Dr. Gordon Sato, whose tree-planting project in coastal Africa helped transform an impoverished village into a self-sufficient economy.

**"Baby Flo"** by Alan Schroeder, illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu.

The title character is the tiny daughter of a washerwoman in early 20th-century Washington, D.C., who sings and tap dances her way to fame

and fortune. Based on the life of African-American entertainer Florence Mills.

**"Baseball Saved Us"** by Ken Mochizuki, illustrated by Dom Lee.

Japanese Americans in an internment camp during World War II organize a baseball team.

**"Tankborn"** by Karen Sandler.

In a dystopian society where genetically engineered, tank-gestated people serve as slaves to naturally born humans, two teenage "tankborns" try to foil a kidnapping conspiracy.

**"Irena's Jar of Secrets"** by Marcia Vaughan, illustrated by Ron Mazellan.

The true story of Irena Sandler, a Polish-Catholic social worker who helped save 2,500 Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II.

**"Bird"** by Zetta Elliott, illustrated by Shadra Strickland.

This "New Voices Award" winner tells the story of Bird, an African-American child who turns to drawing to cope with his family problems.

**"In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall"** illustrated by Javaka Steptoe.

A beautifully illustrated anthology of African-American poetry, celebrating the bond between father and child.

cant amount of the space on each page.

Rather than changing the format of its own storybooks, getting the chance to buy a booklist with books already formatted for two languages was serendipity. "It turns out the education market does have a demand for bilingual titles, plus they're great stories," Low said.

In 2010, Lee & Low extended their reach further with the acquisition of a new imprint for middle grade and young adult readers, Tu Publishing.

"For the middle grades, the science fiction, fantasy, and mystery books are very big," Low said. The imprint released its first titles last year, with an important difference: all have characters from diverse backgrounds. Under the Lee & Low imprint, the free-verse young adult novel "Under the Mesquite," by new novelist Guadalupe Garcia McCall, won both the Pura Belpré Award and a William C. Morris Award for debut writers. The book, written from the point of view of a young girl whose mother is dying of cancer, depicts a close-knit Mexican-American family.

Low is comfortable with the idea of experimenting with writing styles and genres. The publisher's first foray into graphic novels, "Yummy," is based on the

true story of an 11-year-old gang member in Chicago's South Side.

"Graphic novels are a great format for telling older stories," Low said, noting that he himself was a "reluctant reader" whose favorite form of literature as a child was the comic book. In those days, he said, comic books were considered unacceptable material by the educational establishment, but nowadays, librarians welcome the graphic novel format.

"It was gritty and it was honest," Low said about "Yummy," which went on to win the Coretta Scott King Author Award. First published in 2011, it is already in its sixth printing.

Low acknowledges that part of the beauty of being an independent publisher is the ability to make independent choices of what to publish. Lee & Low's roster of writers includes established authors, writers whose manuscripts were published after they came in over the transom, and authors who were discovered in Lee & Low's New Voices Award program, which encourages writers of color to submit their work.

Low couldn't say exactly why he picks one manuscript over another. "It's based on a gut reaction — if it's something I'm moved by. You have to take that leap of faith."