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Publishing with a purpose

House with Louisville-based co-founder finds strength in social relevance

By Tamara Ikenberg

tikenberg@courier-journal.com

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NewSouth, a risk-taking, socially conscious publishing house with the chutzpah to drop titles like "Ali Dubyah and The Forty Thieves," has a strong Kentucky connection.

A former shoe factory on South Court Street in Montgomery, Ala., is the 8-year-old company's headquarters. Its second home is a neat, book-filled home office in the St. Matthews area.

NewSouth co-founder Suzanne La Rosa relocated to Louisville in 2006. The banking career of her husband, Michael Gifford, brought the couple and their son, Julien, now 13, here.

But La Rosa took her job with her.

She telecommunicates with the Montgomery office and stops in every six weeks or so. She is in near-constant contact with her business partner, newspaper veteran and civil-rights activist Randall Williams. The situation has its challenges, but La Rosa and Williams haven't let the distance interfere with their intentions.

"We certainly miss having her around. She's not only a smart person, but as somebody told me when they met her, 'She classes the joint up,' " Williams said in a phone interview from the Montgomery office. "It was natural that we started working together. Her interests do parallel mine in terms of literary fiction, significant regional history and the mission of publishing good books. We know we'd be better off if we were less mission-oriented. We've published some poetry, even though we both know you may as well be setting fire to hundred-dollar bills. It's an important form in our language and literature."

Before forming NewSouth with Williams, La Rosa, a native New Yorker, gained experience as executive editor of Woman's Day, division manager for The Taunton Press and head of her own publishing house, Black Dome Press. She moved to Montgomery because of her husband's job and quickly met Williams, a dynamo who had worked as a reporter at The Birmingham News, owned his own newspaper and publishing house and had volunteered for numerous civil-rights causes, including the Southern Poverty Law Center, which also is based in Montgomery.

Their combination of skills has made NewSouth a powerful small house.

"They're a good example of a small, niche publisher, and they make a go of it in a publishing scene that is dominated by three or four national conglomerates," said Edward Nawotka, Southern correspondent for Publishers Weekly. "A passionate publisher with very specific taste and the intention of catering to a limited, but passionate audience" can succeed, he said. "You don't have the expectation ... that you're going to sell millions of copies of the book. That's a mistake writers and fledgling publishers make."

With fewer than 10 full-time staff members, NewSouth puts out 20 to 25 titles a year. It accepts non-represented submissions and receives far more manuscripts than it can handle.

The house is doing well in a time when people are reading less for leisure, and major publishing houses are only interested in tried-and-true mega-selling scribes, such as Danielle Steele, John Grisham, J.K. Rowling or the newest

wunderkind like Myla Goldberg.

"New York City publishers are taking the safer course," La Rosa said. "It's been hard for them too. What that means for us, is all the people who used to be published by major New York houses are looking for new publishers. I view that as an opportunity. We can acquire writers who formerly would've been published by Simon & Schuster. Now, if an NYC house can't sell 50,000 copies of a book, they won't be considered. There are a lot of extremely gifted authors who will sell 42,000 copies, and that's where we come in."

Publishers Weekly's Nawotka also praises NewSouth's eclectic collection of titles. Most contain civil-rights or cultural-awareness angles, but they take very different forms.

The 2004 release "Where We Stand: Voices of Southern Dissent" approaches civil-rights issues through a series of essays by such respected writers as Kentucky native and social historian John Egerton and civil-liberties attorney John Pollitt.

A more recent release, the 2006 novel "Grievances," is based on a true story and was written by Pulitzer Prize-winning former Charlotte Observer reporter Mark Ethridge. It addresses Southern equality issues through the suspenseful tale of a newspaper reporter who sets out to find the truth behind the shooting of a 13-year-old African-American boy in fictional Hirtsboro, S.C. Ethridge, grandson of former Courier-Journal publisher Mark F. Ethridge, brings to the book an inside-newspaper humor and deft sense of the South.

In "Grievances," he writes, "... for every mile you go deeper into South Carolina, you go another year back in time. By his reckoning, by the time I got to Hirtsboro, I'd be in the antebellum South." Currently, he's working on adapting "Grievances" into a movie with Nashville's Transcendent Films.

"We want books that open a window on to a culture," La Rosa said. "I love stories about communities, especially when you don't know much about them."

A NewSouth book that beautifully fits that bill is the Jewish-themed children's book "Shlemiel Crooks," written by Anna Olswanger and illustrated by Paula Goodman Koz. A clever twist on the Passover tale, "Crooks" was inspired by a 1919 newspaper article from The St. Louis Jewish Record, and uncovers St. Louis' Jewish community in the early 1900s.

The new release "Poor Man's Provence" by beloved Atlanta Journal-Constitution newspaper columnist Rheta Grimsley Johnson uncovers Cajun Louisiana and, as Johnson notes, is in the tradition of Peter Mayle's 1991 best-seller "A Year in Provence." That book is a true story portraying Mayle as a fish out of water in the south of France.

"I love Peter Mayle's books," Johnson said. "For 12 years, I've been spending part of the year in Southwest Louisiana. I looked around and I thought, 'Well, I have the characters, I have the food, I have a lot of the same things, and it doesn't require a passport.'"

NewSouth also isn't afraid to create political waves.

Its 2006 book "Ali Dubyah and the Forty Thieves," by Egerton, with its swirling gilded edges, looks like an ancient relic, save for the familiar, caricatured faces on the cover. It's George W. Bush leading his insane-looking pals down a desert road. The doomsday fable is as creative as it is controversial. The "Bush King's" cronies have menacingly funny monikers like Dick Chaingang and Donald Rumsfailed. "Ali Dubyah" is not entirely kind to the Dems either. President Clinton is lasciviously labeled "King Zip."

"I've known Randall Williams for a great many years, and when I decided to write that book -- more or less in the heat of passion -- I called Randall because he was the only publisher I knew who could possibly turn something around as quickly as that," said Egerton, uncle of Courier-Journal theater critic Judith Egerton.

That's a compulsion to which Williams and La Rosa, whose business really is a tale of two fascinating Southern cities, can definitely relate.

Reporter Tamara Ikenberg can be reached at (502) 582-4174.

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