

Parks' book makes its mark on library's fortunes

By Sylvia O'Hagan

IRVINGTON — One of the most significant protagonists of the civil rights movement, Rosa Parks, is the centerpiece of a Black History Month-themed book display and silent auction by the Friends of the Irvington Library through Feb. 28. The children's book "Dear Mrs. Parks — A Dialogue with Today's Youth" is a collection of letters to Parks from youth throughout the world and her responses to their queries about everything from personal and societal issues to her history-making refusal, in 1955, to give up her seat on a racially segregated bus in Alabama. The book, signed by Parks in two places — once in the front and once in the back, was donated by Irvington resident Tom Low, publisher of this and other award-winning children's titles through his imprint, Lee & Low Books.

Low has donated books and funds to the Friends organization (FOL) in recent years, but felt "Dear Mrs. Parks" would be especially meaningful now. "This is a special book," said Low, who explained he was not sure why — perhaps it was in error — the book was autographed twice. "We are very excited about how well the auction is going so far," he said.

Bidding, which commenced with an introduction by State Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins at the FOL's third annual benefit spelling bee at Town Hall Theater on Jan. 30, had reached \$1,200 by press time Feb. 11. The book was secured for the auction by FOL President Laura Seaman, who is a friend and frequent "Aqueduct walking companion" to Low. Seaman said response to the silent auction took her organization completely by surprise.

"We knew it was a wonderful book, but this is beyond our dreams," said Seaman. "We are very appreciative of Tom's donation and the community's interest." The auction closes on Feb. 28, with the winner to be notified in early March. Proceeds of this and all FOL fundraising campaigns go directly to the library for enrichment projects, including adult and children programs, books on tapes, and other library extras.

Low has been a resident of Irving-



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Tom Low holds the copy of "Dear Mrs. Parks" that he donated for a silent auction to benefit the Irvington Public Library.

ton for 30 years, and of Hastings for six years before that. After working in the temporary personnel business for many years, he switched to publishing in 1991, and released his first books in 1993. "I met a young man [Philip Lee] who had an idea to pub-

lish multicultural books for children," said Low on how Lee & Low was founded. "I thought it was a great concept, took publishing courses at NYU and we got started." Lee & Low is considered a small publisher, said Low, whose books bring multi-cul-

tural themes and stories, set in contemporary, relatable settings, to children ages 5–12. The business partners, who are both of Chinese-American descent, have the distinction of being among the few minority founders of a book-publishing firm. Low now works with his two sons, who he says have helped modernize the business, complete with a new Web site, www.leeandlow.com. Jason Low, who lives in Ardsley, joined his brother Craig at the firm after Philip Lee left to relocate five years ago.

Lee & Low books are primarily sold to schools and libraries. "Our books are serious in nature, not mass market," explained Low. They have been widely recognized in publishing, education, and cultural arenas, winning awards including the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belpré Honor Award, the Parents' Choice Award, the Jane Addams Peace Award, Child Magazine's Best Books, a Reading Rainbow Feature Title, American Bookseller "Pick of the Lists" honors, and "Choices" honors by the Cooperative Children's Book Center as well as recognition through The New York Times, Publishers Weekly, "CBS This Morning," USA Today, Kirkus Reviews, and Smithsonian Magazine.

Low notes that one of the most vital missions of his publishing firm is to champion and discover new talent, and proudly tells of having discovered more than 100 new writers and illustrators. One, Shadra Strickland, an African-American illustrator, recently won the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe New Talent Award for the Lee & Low book "Bird," written by Zetta Elliot. Low sponsors an annual contest called "New Voices" for never-published writers and illustrators, many of whom go on to create for Lee & Low books. "It's very, very rewarding to see new people, new talent, join this field," said Low.

Low had the pleasure of meeting Parks when "Dear Mrs. Parks" was first released, in 1996. "Rosa Parks had signed some books in preparation for a book tour," recalled Low. "Unfortunately, she was not able to finish as she took ill ... but we still had some of the books." Parks died in

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2005 at the age of 92.

Unsigned copies of the book, which has won many awards, including the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Children's Literary Achievement, are still available through Lee & Low for \$10.95 in trade paperback form. "We still sell about 5,000 copies of the book a year," said Low.

Bidding on the twice-signed first edition started at \$50, and took off after village resident Geraint Owen raised the price from \$450 to \$1,000. Owen, whose three young children attend village schools and enjoy the library's programs and services, said that he decided to participate in the auction as "it's an interesting book, but more than that, it's a fantastic cause." The high bid at press time was by Irvington resident and retired New York University professor

Pat Bonomi. "It's such a valuable artifact," said Bonomi, who taught American history.

Owen said he would be monitoring the bidding and is "for sure" still interested in acquiring the book. "With the election of our new president, it's more timely than ever," said Owen. "It's definitely something I would want to share with my children."

'Spotlight' ideas sought

The Rivertowns Enterprise welcomes story ideas for our "Spotlight on the Arts" feature, which focuses on various artists, including musicians, painters, sculptors, filmmakers, writers, and dancers, as well as events happening in area galleries, schools, and libraries. To submit an idea, please e-mail rivertownnews@optonline.net with "Spotlight on the Arts" in the subject field or drop off information at the paper's office, 95 Main St., Dobbs Ferry.