PubWest Awards Joe Biel the inaugural Innovator Award

Maricopa, AZ – PubWest has awarded its 2024 Innovator Award to Joe Biel of Microcosm Publishing.

PubWest’s Innovator Award celebrates an individual who has worked to expand and strengthen book publishing by reimagining what publishing can or should be or through exceptional efforts to develop new skills that expand publishing into the future.

Joe accepted the Award from IBPA’s Andrea Fleck-Nisbet during the PubWest 2024 conference, February 8, in Maricopa, Arizona. Following her remarks, the audience was treated to an interview/conversation about Joe’s work and vision.

In the early 1990s, with no prior publishing experience, industry connections, or startup funding, Joe Biel set out – in his words – “to start the punk rock version of publishing”. With a mission to equip readers to make positive changes in their lives and in the world around them -- and the vision to remove barriers to success for marginalized people in our industry, Microcosm initially operated their business out of milk crates and closets, sold books from backpacks, at bicycle festivals, and on street corners – and were informed repeatedly by distributors that there was “no market” for their type of books. Three decades later, Joe – and his publishing partner, Elly Blue – have built a roadmap for successful, scalable, and profitable book publishing that operates largely outside the traditional, mainstream channels of our industry.

After partnering with several distributors who couldn’t quite grow their business effectively, Microcosm set a new mandate in 2018 to stop supplying to Amazon, put little effort into major accounts, and focus on building relationships with independent retailers – defying all the rules that trade publishing tells us we must adhere to.

In 2019, the company grew 156% and now adds 150+ new stores each month to its customer base. In 2022, Microcosm was named one of the fastest growing independent publishers in the country. Today, Microcosm operates their own distribution business, two warehouses, and a successful bookstore in Portland, Oregon. They plan to release 42 new titles and ship 550,000 books out of their warehouses in 2024.

As part of managing their own business, Joe and Elly have also developed an operations platform, WorkingLit, that manages all their title data, sales, inventory, invoicing, accounting, shipping, website functionality, data exports, taxes, performance analytics, and product management. With the goal of helping other independent publishers succeed in the market and control their own destiny, WorkingLit will soon be available to other small publishing businesses so they can manage their operations in a cost-effective way.

Because – in the true spirit of punk - Joe believes that every publisher with quality content, a strong value proposition, and the desire to use books for the greater good of readers CAN succeed with the
right tools to make their books available wherever and whenever book buyers want to discover and purchase them.

As Andrea said, "What excites me most about Joe’s approach to publishing is that it can be done successfully – and profitably – with the right tools, the right content, and the right motives without following the traditional path of corporate publishing or adhering to supply chain rules."

And that is the spirit of the Innovator.

**About PubWest:** PubWest is a nonprofit trade association for North American book publishers—from small independent presses to publishing companies with worldwide operations—and related professionals, such as printers, designers, binderies, and publishing freelancers. For more information, please visit www.pubwest.org.

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