



Episode 16 Industry to Unplanned Entrepreneur, with Shimul Tolia

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Rushab Kamdar: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Business 360 Podcast where we will take a 360 degree view of all things business in under 30 minutes. I'm Rushab Kamdar and I help businesses, startup founders, working professionals and master students think business, talk business, launch their business and grow their business.

What's going on, Business Heroes? Welcome to episode 16. And I'm really excited about today's episode because we're going to talk about something that many working professionals have dreamt of going from a nine to five to being a very successful entrepreneur.

And what's even more amazing about our guest today, she's a social warrior. And has a purpose driven mission behind her business model. So let's get to it.

Today on the Business 360 Podcast, we're welcoming Shimul Tolia, who is the Chief Executive Officer, founder and co-owner of Little Bee Books. Now, before her leading Little Bee Books, Shimul was the Chief Executive Officer of Bonnier Publishing USA. In that role, she fostered expansion of the business while leading the New York city and San Francisco offices and collaborating with leadership in the UK and Australia divisions. Together, she will help establish business strategy for the company's English speaking book business. Prior to that, Shimul was also the editorial director at Sterling Publishing, which is a subsidiary of Barnes & Nobles. When Shimul is not running Little Bee Books, she's teaching



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management and leadership as an adjunct professor at New York University School of Professional Studies in their Ms. Publishing program. Finally, Shimul is also a board member on the Children's Book Council. Shimul, thank you for being a guest on the Business 360 Podcast.

Shimul Tolia: [00:01:54] Thank you so much for having me.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:01:56] No, this is great. And as our listeners can hear, uh, you are very, very accomplished. Um, as I mentioned, you are the co-founder and the CEO of Little Bee Books.

So why don't we start there and, you know, just describe a little bit about what Little Bee Books is, um, and how it's different from other companies in that space.

Shimul Tolia: [00:02:17] Sure. Um, Little Bee Books is an independent children's book publisher based out of New York city. The company was founded in 2014 and our first books went on sale in January, 2015.

The current landscape in the publishing industry is for companies to merge, creating larger conglomerates. So what makes Little Bee Books different is that we're a small ship that is able to move fast while also maintaining an entrepreneurial identity.



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Rushab Kamdar: [00:02:45] That's great. So being small, um, in your specific industry, like, where does that exactly put you, you know. So maybe you can describe your industry first and so people get an understanding of what the publishing industry is. It's, I know it's one of the oldest industries out there and then why you being small, where, how does that position you in that space?

Shimul Tolia: [00:03:06] Book publishing is exactly like you said, that's one of the oldest industries in the world and a very traditional industry. It is ever evolving. And right now in a period of change and growth, um, Little Bee Books is within a certain niche in publishing. So publishing is dominated by educational publishing, adult non-fiction, adult fiction, adult fiction. And then there's also children's book publishing and that's a space that we plan. Children's book publishing is primarily broken down by age levels and formats.

We at Little Bee Books published from pre-K to YA, fiction and non-fiction books and formats ranging from board books to graphic novels. The publishing industry as a whole is dominated by five to six large players. Many of whom are household names, and that have been in the book publishing business for decades, or even as long as a century or more. Being a young company and being much smaller means that we have to be very scrappy and very smart every step of the way.

And just to give you an idea, if the publishing industry is, I dunno, the Pacific ocean, we were like a puddle in that ocean. We're small, we're new, we're



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scrappy and we're entrepreneurial, but, um, we've made, we've started to make our mark and, um, we're, you know, we're up for the challenge.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:04:19] So you mentioned that your Little Bee Books is in a specific niche of that larger publishing industry. Um, from what I understand, there's a very purpose driven and social mission behind, um, Little Bee Books, uh, where you're raising awareness. So can you describe what that mission is and what is like the end goal of Little Bee Books?

Shimul Tolia: [00:04:40] Yes. So our publishing has built on what we consider to be five pillars, which are our, which is our publishing North Star. And these pillars are diversity, acceptance, anti-bullying, empowerment and awareness. And I'll go into each one of these pillars to help you understand what it is we do and what we stand for.

So diversity is our first pillar and, um, that's somewhat self-explanatory. And to go into a little more detail, we create books that showcase and amplify the voices of the African, African-American, Black-American communities, the Asian-American communities, and many other marginalized communities in the United States. But what we also are looking to do is we're taking these lesser known stories. There are some amazing books publish about MLK and Rosa Parks, but then there are these lesser known African-American, um, people in history like a woman named Anne Cole Lowe, who is a prolific, uh, designer. And she went on to create the wedding gown for Jackie Bouvier when she was going to marry JFK. And she not



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only created the wedding gown, which is actually on display in a museum in Georgia right now, but she also created all the bridesmaids gowns. And right before the wedding, her studio was going down and it, what she did was she toiled day and night to recreate all these dresses. And the day of the wedding, she showed up at the mansion and she wasn't let in through the front door because she was black. Um, and she refused. She's told about they're either you let me in through the front door or the bride's not going to get her wedding gown and it's stories. And she was let in through the front door.

And it's amazing stories like these that we're able to bring to life in a picture book. And we're able to then put in the hands of families and children who are able to educate themselves on so many different, amazing people in American history.

Um, under our diversity pillar, we also create a lot of bilingual publishing. The world we live in, especially the melting pot, that is the US is so diversity led and so many different languages are spoken. So we don't only want to create books in English. So we actually have a publishing program with Disney right now where we buy, we create books in English- Mandarin, English- Spanish, and English- French. Um, we do a lot of our publishing in English or Spanish or bilingual.

We also create coloring books in English and in Spanish and French and Mandarin as well. So we take our diversity publishing really seriously, and we try to not only work with contributors, so authors and illustrators who come from



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diverse backgrounds, but we also try to elevate their stories, their voices and amplify, um, the different cultures that they come from so that we can create more awareness in the U S.

So when you're reading a book, you're not only reading about, you're not only seeing your life and your family and a version of you, but you can also see your neighbors. You can see your classmates, you can see your friends and that can help broaden your view of the country that we live in. Um, so that's our first pillar.

Our second pillar is acceptance and it's all about LGBTQ acceptance. And with this pillar, we actually have a publishing partnership with GLADD, who's the largest non-for-profit gay and lesbian alliance organization in the world. And GLAAD has been amazing. They've been a really great partner with us because a lot of the LGBTQ publishing we do, they have helped to ensure that the message, the messaging that we're creating, the words that we're using are not only correct for children, for families, but also represent the LGBTQ community really well as well. Um, so we're really proud of the acceptance publishing that we do with GLADD. And we've gotten a lot of recognition around these LGBTQ books that we do.

Our third pillar, which I think is very self-explanatory is anti-bullying.

Um, our fourth pillar is empowerment and we don't only want to empower a young girl. So we do a lot of girl empowerment books, but we don't be sexist at a



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young age. So we do a lot of empowerment around young girl, for young girls, for young boys, um, and about breaking gender stereotypes.

And a fifth pillar is awareness. So we break that up into three different buckets. One is mental awareness. So we don't shy away from tougher subjects like anxiety with kids or depression with children. We don't want to shy away from those subjects. We obviously do everything with the soft touch. Should we need to, uh, if we need to work with a child psychologist, we do that. We want to make sure that everything we're doing is being represented properly, but we also don't want to shy away from tougher subjects just because they're tough to discuss.

Um, so, positive mental awareness, mental awareness is a big part of our publishing. The next is positive body awareness. We want to ensure that everything we're doing is showcasing, um, body awareness and the way it needs to be in that we're not shaming people and we're all about inclusivity. And then the third bucket under awareness is environmental awareness, which once again is self-explanatory, but we work with a lot of different organizations and with different licenses to give you an idea, there's a show on PBS called Nature Cat, and it's all about environmentalism and protecting the earth and we do publishing with them. Um, so not only do we create the, not only do we follow these pillars in the books we create, but we also work with licenses and we want to ensure that they follow these pillars.



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We also work with YouTube influencers like JoJo Siwa, and, you know, she is, she is an empowered young woman. She is an entrepreneur, she's a business woman. So what they stand for has to align with what we stand for as well. And you asked about our end goal, publishing socially responsible books that contribute to society in a positive way and promote activism is really important to Little Bee Books equally as important to us is helping families navigate tough conversations through our books and helping parents educate children in fun, with our fun and entertaining content.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:10:11] So I love the progressiveness of the mission of Little Bee Books, right? And, and I think, you know, personally, I feel that change and being progressive is always going to be the way of, of humankind human nature. Um, and education is the key to that, right? And that's what you're bringing in from your books. Uh, but with a mission of being progressive, it does ruffle feathers. Um, there's always a subset of the population, whether large or small, that is not always up for change.

Uh, so there has been, I believe some, sometimes you get some backlash or for the books that you release or they've been banned or things like that, you know? What would you like to say about that? And, and, you know, how would you like to change the narrative, um, so that these books don't get banned or you don't receive backlash when you're trying to educate on, on subjects that are really relevant today?



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Shimul Tolia: [00:11:04] So very obviously, so we're proud of what we stand for and our mission. And while backlash is expected because we understand many people come from different backgrounds and different backgrounds of thought. The backlash doesn't really phase us. If anything, it serves to drive us, um, we're trying to change a narrative by not shying away from tough, tougher subjects. We live in a world where children have to fear guns and safe places like schools. So combating ignorance starts with education and that's what we're looking to accomplish. And even though our books might hit banned list books, or we might receive backlash, if anything, it just further serves to help us know that the purpose of our publishing and the purpose of the mission of the company is more important and relevant than ever. And it drives us to do more.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:11:55] Great. So let's take the conversation towards, um, specifically your path towards being a founder of Little Bee Books, right? So you are the co-founder and you know, we love talking on this podcast specifically about entrepreneurship. Uh, your path was unique. Uh, maybe you can describe that journey.

Shimul Tolia: [00:12:15] Sure. I think what's most unique about my path is I never thought I was going to be an entrepreneur. It was never a goal of mine. Uh, it was something that I slowly built my way to. And now I can't imagine a life not doing this, but, um, it was never the path that I set for myself.



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So I first started off in publishing as an assistant as many people in publishing do. Publishing is very much an industry where you start at the bottom and you have to work your way up through the top, up through to the top. And I spent eight years, um, working at Sterling Publishing, which was the in-house publishing arm for Barnes & Noble, which still is.

And in those eight years I had an amazing, I had the ability to do many different jobs. I had eight roles and I had really amazing experience there. And I was very lucky in that I started off in sales and I spent five years in sales, but I was able to make the move to editorial, which is not something that happens very easily in publishing.

And that taught me a lot about the full scope of the industry. And I think that was really the first step for me to being an entrepreneur because if I was very siloed in the role that I was doing, I would have never understood the larger picture and so much about being an entrepreneur is not only understanding, but learning the bigger picture. Because being an entrepreneur, entrepreneur means you have to be macro on so many different things you do.

Even if you are a micro person, you have to learn to see the larger picture. So, to me step one in this path was recognizing that I wanted to do this. Step two was getting this amazing opportunity to start a publishing company for Bonnier in the US. Um, I started Little Bee Books in February of 2014. At the time we were not independent. We were actually started by Bonnier which is a 200 plus year old,



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\$4 billion privately held Swedish conglomerate and they have many, um, they have arms in book publishing, magazine publishing, and throughout all different forms of media. And what I did for them was they wanted to start a children's book publisher in New York.

And that's what I did with Little Bee Books. I worked for them for five years and those five years, we started up Little Bee Books from scratch. We also acquired a company in San Francisco called Weldon Owen, which was an adult, which is an adult non-fiction publisher. So for those five years, I ran those two companies for them.

And then about two years ago, I got the amazing opportunity to buy Little Bee Books. So now for two years, we've been independent, um, and we've been able to take this business that we created and made our own, and then actually make it our own. And that's been a really amazing opportunity and something I feel really blessed to do day in and day out.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:14:54] You know, I always find, um, it's so interesting, right, that you were in a company and you built Little Bee Books while you were in that company for that company, right? And you, and you had the resources of the company, right, to build this, uh, which a lot of entrepreneurs don't necessarily have those resources when they start off, right?



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But at the same time, because you were able to build something, um, that you can still call your own. You co-founded something, no matter who the umbrella was under. And, and then you made it and then, and then you basically bought it out. Um, when you, when that opportunity came to do the buyout, uh, you know, there's, there's a conversation that's happening in the entrepreneurial community that why start a business when you can buy a business.

And you're still an entrepreneur, maybe if, if it's possible or if you're, if you're able to just shed a little light on what that was, as far as the dynamics of buying it from Bonnier, how did that go?

Shimul Tolia: [00:15:55] I think, well, the easiest thing about buying a company that you started as, you know, the ins and outs, you know. You know there's two ways to buy a company. You can buy the assets or you can buy the whole company. And it's very hard to buy a whole company with the assets and the liabilities when you don't know the ins and outs. I didn't know the ins and outs. I knew all the liabilities and any of the assets because it's something that me, along with my, my business partner and I grew together.

Um, so for us, it was a bit of a no-brainer. We knew where the company was going. We knew what our mission was. We were very passionate about the mission. We knew the staff we had on hand and that they were passionate about the mission. So that part was a bit of a no-brainer, but I agree with very much with the one comment you made. I'm super grateful. Very few people have the



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opportunity to start a company from scratch, buy a company, sell a company all with somebody else's resources. So I was very lucky with so many different steps that, um, that happened in my career. And if you know, that has led me to where I am now.

And it also has led me to understand the challenges that it has led me to understand, um, the positives that come with it, and also the risks owning a company, starting a company, regardless of you do it for yourself or for someone else there's risk associated day in and day out. But I think the one thing that I'll say about buying a company versus starting a company, everyone has to do what's right for them. But the one thing I learned in starting a company is that every single day brings new challenges. No day is the same. And there are times where I learned more in one day, starting a company than I did in one month working for somebody else.

There's so much that you have to learn and so much that you have to do yourself and it makes you a very well-rounded business person when you have to do that, instead of one part of it is handed to you. And I'm very, very thankful that I have gone through that process, but I also know how exhausting it is and how much drive you have to have to get through a day in and day out.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:17:53] I love that. I, you know, there's a lot of times I'll get asked, you know, what does it take to be an entrepreneur? And I say, I've said this before on my podcast, which is, um, yeah, you know, you'll hear people say,



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you need determination, grit, you know, drive all that stuff but the reality is you need that for any profession. If you're an athlete, you need that. If you're an executive of a fortune 500 company, you need that.

Um, but, but what as an entrepreneur, what you really need is liking it. You need to like what you do because of the amount of challenges that come your way, you know? So I always say an entrepreneur needs to be a problem solver. And if you, and if you like being a problem- solver, you're going to like being an entrepreneur because there's never going to be a period where it's just steady and going, right?

Like you set, you set the business and you think, okay, it's, it's on autopilot. You always need your hand somewhere on that stairwell, right? It's never autopilot. So, um, I'm glad you said that. So that leads me actually to the next question, which is. You know, you said as an entrepreneur, you, how you learn more in one day than you did one month working for someone. So there's challenges that come across being an entrepreneur. Running Little Bee Books, what are some of the most common challenges you faced as you were running that company?

Shimul Tolia: [00:19:03] Like most startups, be a startup in phase one or phase two. Most of our challenges are based around staffing and cash. It's so important to find a team that believes in your mission. Um, and you might find great people, but sometimes they're not the people that believe in your mission, or you might find people that believe in your mission, but might not be the right people for the



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company. So having the right group of people surround you is so important. Um, there's a lot of comfort in working for a larger company, uh, especially in the publishing, publishing industry, because there's so many operational difficulties and efficiencies that need to be worked out and in a startup, we're still figuring out so many of our different operational efficiencies and processes and procedures. So I think that finding people who can work in some discomfort is so important to success. And that's always something that is a challenge because people might want to be in that position, but not always thrive in an area without a lot of answers and with discomfort.

So that's definitely something that's been challenging. And then for Little Bee Books in particular and within the publishing industry for many small independent companies, it's marketing. We just don't have the marketing dollars to compete with a lot of larger companies. And this, I don't think this is publishing specific.

So having to be not only scrappier, but smarter, more creative, grittier. It is a lot of work and a lot of effort. And that goes back to my first point. You have to have the right people around you. And when you do, you're really blessed because one, the buck can stop with one or two people. And you're right, being a problem solver is necessary for a leader, but really if you don't have the right team, you're not going to get very far. So I think finding that team and then making sure that they stay motivated and they stay inspired is so difficult but so important.



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Rushab Kamdar: [00:20:55] I love that. It is, first of all, a hundred percent true in my own experience as well. Having a team that buys into the culture and a culture that you create that fosters even their growth and empowers the team itself, right? Um, so like you said, they're a team that's willing to work through discomfort, but the culture is built right, the discomfort is it's it's a, uh, an afterthought for them, right? It's really just a mission, right? They're mission driven. Um, and it is a team that grows. A lot of times entrepreneurs started solopreneurs and then they become entrepreneurs when they start building out a team.

And, uh, what's very hard for most entrepreneurs is delegating and giving up their own responsibility like taking your hands off the reins of certain things. So, um, you know, you know, no matter what you said, I think that is probably the biggest takeaway anyone can take from, um, challenges of operating a business, build a team that's, that's good for you, that's right, that buys into culture, et cetera. So thanks for that.

Um, you know, while we talk about challenges, you know, we faced, in many businesses have faced some tremendous challenges in the past year, uh, because of the pandemic. Uh, some businesses have thrived because of the pandemic while others have shuttered. How has Little Bee Books performed, um, during this, uh, unusual time?



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Shimul Tolia: [00:22:16] We've been really blessed. I'm so thankful and so happy to tell you that children's book publishing in general has thrived as we've all been in quarantine in our homes. Parents have had to educate their children. They've, they've had to handle teaching at home. They've had to handle virtual teaching. On top of that, there's so many other parts of daily life that we're all juggling. And a lot of families have turned to books, have turned to reading, have turned to activity books, and that's, that's helped not just Little Bee Books, but the children's book industry in general.

We found that so many of our coloring books that are sold at Walmart and Target have done so well for two reasons, one coloring books are doing well because it's a really great way for children to be active without being in front of a screen. And second Walmart and Target and so many different grocery stores are where people are spending a lot of their time right now.

Um, I'm looking forward to the day when independent bookstores and Barnes & Noble and libraries are all going to start being frequented again. But I'm really, really thankful to the fact that Amazon and grocery stores and a lot of other mass chains have been around to support so many different industries at this time.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:23:35] So I want to take the conversation towards a more opinion question and it's, you know, I tend to sometimes ask these types of controversial type questions because it's so necessary to keep the conversation



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and engagement on these questions. So you are a female entrepreneur, a woman of color, and you are in an industry that's not essentially known for its diversity.

Uh, so you know, it's really an open-ended question. What would you like to talk or say about that specifically?

Shimul Tolia: [00:24:04] I'm going to be forward, forward thinking, not talking about me or my past or anything. And then I think now is our time. Diversity is being recognized and respected more than ever. And I think there are so many people of color, women of color in different industries that are prime to shine.

And I can't wait to see that happen. I don't think my journey is publishing specific. I think, um, there have been many battles that people of color, I know that people of color face in, um, in Corporate America and careers, and I think now's the time to shine. So I, I'm looking forward to seeing so many different entrepreneurs and people of color come forward with ideas and with success stories and with ambition.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:24:49] I leave you with this question. What advice do you have for anybody that's pursuing entrepreneurship?

Shimul Tolia: [00:24:57] Um, get comfortable with being uncomfortable. That's probably the most important thing. Understand what your, your level of comfort is and then strive beyond that. Be scrappy, be one step ahead, be passionate



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because without all of those things, you're not going to have the work ethic that you need to get through the challenges that are presented on sometimes an hourly and definitely a daily basis.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:25:27] How about an entrepreneur that wants to get into publishing, like start their own publishing.

Shimul Tolia: [00:25:32] You're welcome to give me a call. I am more than happy to give all the information that I can. I believe in paying it forward and I think that, um, anybody who wants to start in publishing should definitely think about what they can bring to the table, what their niche is, what they're going to do different and then go after it.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:25:52] And I would say one last part to that question. I guess it's more of a tangent to that question, which is there's a lot of, um, a lot of people, it doesn't have to be entrepreneurs, but a lot of people who want to write their own book.

Uh, what, what would you say, you know, I'm not saying it's easy just to go to publishing house and have them publish it for you cause I know they have to buy into it. But what would you say versus them self-publishing through Amazon versus going through a publishing house?



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Shimul Tolia: [00:26:18] I think it's, um, it's really up to the author themselves. They're two very different routes. I think that, uh, it also depends on the book, the kind of marketing that they need behind the book. If they're self-publishing something and there's already an audience for it, then maybe self-publishing is a smart route to go down because it's a really good way for you to have more control. And it's a really good way for, um, profits to come directly to you. But I think there's a, publishing is the machine and there's a reason for that machine. Um, there are a lot of different arms and there is a lot of important work that happens through so many different departments within the industry.

And if somebody wants that support, wants that machine, then they should go through an agent or they should go directly to a publisher and they should work that way because I think there's so many different things that publishing can bring to a book that sometimes self-publishing can't.

But I also liked that self-publishing as an option for people. There are many people who have thrived in the self-publishing world who then actually go on to become published by a publisher, which is great or vice versa as well. What I like is there's options for people and there's really no right fit for anybody. And they've got, they've got to figure out what their end goal is and then know, figure out the route that they need to take to get through to that end goal.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:27:40] Shimul you are a change-maker. Keep doing what you're doing.



Episode 16 : Industry to Unplanned Entrepreneur, with Shimul Tolia

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Shimul Tolia: [00:27:44] Thank you very much.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:27:45] No, thank you for being a guest on the Business 360 Podcast. And I can't wait to have you again down the road as a guest.

Shimul Tolia: [00:27:52] Thank you so much. It was a pleasure speaking with you and I look forward to coming back on this podcast again.

Rushab Kamdar: [00:27:58] Thank you.

Thank you for joining us on the Business 360 Podcast. To learn more about our guests, go to [thinkbusiness360.com](https://www.thinkbusiness360.com). In life, I follow two things that keep me grounded. Number one, if you only listen to someone's successes and not their failures, you've only heard half the story and number two, compete with yourself and help everyone else. You stay classy, Business Heroes.



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