



Bonus Episode Transcript

Helen Lee on Diversity in Publishing

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Ed, Maila, Helen

Maila 01:19

Welcome to a bonus episode of the Every Voice Now podcast. I'm Maila Kim.

Ed 01:24

And I'm Maila's right-hand man Ed Gilbreath. And we're excited today to welcome a very special guest to The Every Voice Now Podcast, our very own producer, visionary extraordinaire, Miss Helen Lee.

Maila 01:37

Yay. Yes, I mean, so in addition to being the mastermind behind this podcast,

Helen 01:45

Hardly, hardly!

Maila 01:46

Helen is the Associate Director of Strategic Partnerships for InterVarsity Press. And she's also the leader of IVP's Every Voice Now initiative, which she's going to talk to us about in a moment. But on top of all of that, she's also an accomplished author, a speaker, a mother, a wife, a thoughtful leader. So, you know, she has a lot of free time. So welcome to the podcast, Helen!

Helen 02:14

Thanks so much to my favorite co-hosts of my favorite podcast. So this is our podcast, something that we all have been working on together really from scratch. And it's been so great to be in partnership with you all on this.



Ed 02:28

We're happy to have you. So our listeners will notice that this episode is pretty raw, pretty rough and tumble without all the post-production polish. The reason is, we really wanted to rush to get this done. Helen recently posted an honest and profoundly insightful commentary on the lack of diversity in Christian publishing. And since we occasionally touch on that subject here on Every Voice Now, we thought it would be a great opportunity to have her on the show to talk about that essay, but also to talk about Every Voice Now in general, and how it's becoming a model for how other Christian publishers need to be responding during this historic moment in the church and in the world. So, Helen, thanks for coming out from behind the scenes to talk to us today.

Helen 03:12

Well, I do much prefer being behind the scenes, but I can't say no to you and Maila, Ed, so thank you for asking me.

Maila 03:20

Well, we're going to interview you, like we do all of our other authors. And so this is going to be really fun having you in the hot seat. So you know this, we start every episode by asking our authors, what their ethnic background is to describe their family and where they're from. So tell us your story, Helen.

Helen 03:41

Yes, I'm happy to. So I am second-generation Korean American. My dad is originally from what is now known as North Korea. He was a refugee during that war time period in the Korean War. Today is the 70th anniversary of my dad leaving his home behind him Pyongyang. And so his whole story, we could do a whole podcast on his story, but he was essentially a refugee fleeing that area of Korea, ended up in South Korea and then ended up immigrating to the US, where he eventually met my mom. So he and my mom immigrated to the US separately, and they met in a very American way on a blind date. I guess at that time there weren't that many Koreans to meet one another. So you just have to rely on networks and friendships, and so they they met long distance, they kept in touch, and then they got married within a year after they met after a long distance relationship. So I was born here in the US, I grew up mainly outside of Washington, DC, but I've lived here in Chicagoland for probably more than 20 years now in total.

Maila 04:55

Wow. And now you are the mother of how many boys?



Helen 05:01

Three boys, Ed knows them well, they are an 18-year-old,

Ed 05:05

Talented young men.

Helen 05:07

He's a pianist like his dad. So he has his dad's piano talent. So he's a freshman in college, just like Ed's youngest son. We also have a 15 year old who is a sophomore and a 13 year old who is in eighth grade. So three boys. Yes.

Maila 05:22

That's awesome. So your hands are pretty tied, and you're pretty busy.

Helen 05:26

Oh, no, life is just calm, smooth. No chaos, chaos here.

Maila 05:31

And a cute dog on top of that,

Helen 05:33

Yes, he will probably try to be on the podcast, he will want to make his presence known at some point. So yes, if you hear any crazy sounds in the background, that's probably Simba, our mini-bernedoodle.

Maila 05:48

Well, our listeners probably know that this is a common question that we start our podcast off with, we ask our guests what their story is. And actually, you came up with that question. And so can you even tell our listeners why it's important that we start there?

Helen 06:04

Well, certainly for all of us, our family of origin stories, right, they play such an important role in who we are, and in our identity journeys. But I think particularly for the guests on our show, maybe they are immigrants or children of immigrants like I am, or maybe they're descendants of folks who've been here for centuries, or maybe they have family members who were once enslaved, whatever the case may be, we, I think, have found that story, that ethnic background



journey of our guests often affects their publishing journeys, right? There's some relationship between

Ed 06:40
Absolutely.

Helen 06:42
And so it's just been fascinating to me to hear story after story, that seems to be proven over time, that the gauntlet that authors of color go through to write and get published, it's different than for white authors. I'm not saying it's not hard for white authors. But there's a difference, I think, for authors of color and their journey. And so I think when we ask that question about where they're from, or what their background is, or where they grew up, or what their ethnic background is, it helps to shed light on some of those differences and uniquenesses that go along with being authors of color trying to get published. So that's why I think it's important for us to know that backstory.

Maila 07:21
Yeah, I love that. Well, Helen, you will never toot your own horn. So we will do it for you on this podcast. For those of you listening, and you don't know, Helen, she's had an incredible career, even in the publishing industry. I mean, she's worn every hat that you could possibly wear as an author, an editor, a marketer, and now she's in the strategic role. And so, Helen, we want to ask you, how would you sum up the trajectory of your career? And what have you learned in each of these roles that you've had?

Helen 07:56
Well, thank you, Maila, that's very kind, I think that you are too generous in your adjectives there. I feel like it's indicative of my own, what's that phrase, jack of all trades, master of none. That's kind of how I feel about myself. But it's also, it is part of my personality. I do love learning and doing new things. And so I've really been very fortunate to get a chance to learn all these different parts of the business, I don't think it's something I would have expected, you know, when I came to IVP, in 2014, so it's been a little over six years, I was hired as an acquisitions editor. Ed knows that role, he's done that job as well. And I just thought, I'm going to happily do this job for the rest of my time, as long as the Lord allows to be at IVP, I was really pleased to do that work. It fit me really well. But you know, it's funny how God works, he opened up the door for me to become the director of marketing in 2016. So I think I'm not sure if I said the dates right, I started IVP at 2014. And 2016 is when I became the director of marketing, which was a whole journey, which I did for three years, I knew pretty much nothing about marketing, but my colleagues at IVP thought that some of the other



things in my background, I went to business school, I started dot-com. I'd done some other things in the area of nonprofits and such. And so I guess they thought I could bring all that to bear in the marketing side. It was an incredible learning experience. And Maila, you know that team, now that you are with that team, we didn't get to overlap, unfortunately. But I know the folks you work with, they're all just wonderful folks. And I had a great time doing that. But I think that what I learned over the course of those three years is that I love doing new projects, startup projects. That's something that came out in an assessment I did a couple of years ago. So that led to the job I'm doing now, which is essentially in this area of strategic partnerships. And it has allowed me to be involved in this project, Every Voice Now, which I'm sure we'll talk about more bit as well as some other things like Seminary Now and other unique projects that are just different and out of the norm for us as a publisher. So it's been, it's been truly just so fun to get a chance to do all these things, and to bring all these different parts of me together in this particular role. So I don't know if there's anything in terms of trajectory, I'm not sure that I have any wisdom in terms of what all this means. Except maybe I would say that I think I've learned that whenever you're trying something new, like progress in any area that's new, it just takes intentionality, it takes initiative. And that's, that applies across the board, whether we're talking about acquiring a book on a topic that hasn't been really covered before, at IVP, or in the church, or whether we're talking about increasing multiethnicity, you know, in publishing, any of those things. If we're trying to do something different, something new, it just takes intentionality and initiative. And I think we'll probably talk about all those things as we go on.

Maila 11:03

Well, thank you.

Ed 11:04

I must say I've had the privilege of knowing you and working with you at different points along the way, many years now, I won't say how many years.

Helen 11:14

No, no.

Ed 11:16

But it's been a blessing. And I've learned so much from you. And this is the perfect role for you because it brings your like you said, it brings together so many of your gifts, and we're excited to see your leadership here.

Helen 11:28



Thanks, Ed.

Ed 11:29

So that brings us to this point, Every Voice Now, where did it come from? Could you talk about the origin of it and your vision for it?

Helen 11:38

Well, I can't take credit for starting the initiative. Although I will say that while I was on the senior leadership team at IVP, I had been thinking a lot about how we could continue to strengthen our efforts with authors of color and reaching audiences of color. And actually, at the same time, while I was going through just that own mental exercise in my own head, unbeknownst to me, our publisher, Jeff Crosby was similarly pursuing this kind of idea himself, and specifically trying to create some sort of fund that could help do these kinds of things. And so we finally got on the same page and recognized we were thinking about some of these same things. And he had already gone down a path of trying to actually learn what that means to create a fund, raise a fund. And anyway, all that came together in what we now have in Every Voice Now, which is an initiative that has two parts. So one part is a fund that is designed for various members of IVP's staff to be able to tap into as needed to help with supporting or elevating authors of color that they are working with. So particularly for our editorial folks, or our sales and marketing folks who are the ones who work most directly with those books, it gives them an extra way to be able to find those readers that would match that book, or help find ways to help that author along in their process of building their platform, or whatever it might be. Just a recognition and acknowledgement that there is extra effort needed, at times, to help our authors amplify and elevate their voices. There's also some money in that fund to help with reaching audiences of color, because we recognize that as much as we love to publish authors of color, our audience probably leans still majority white, and that is the church, after all. So we want to continually be mindful of that and figure out ways to continue to broaden our audience base and find ways to reach readers of color, who I think would love our books, if they knew about them, especially the books that we have written by authors of color. And there's also a portion of the fund that's designed for our own internal use to help with our recruiting, to help with our cultural competencies. So just to continue to strengthen our multiethnicity muscles, if you will, to help us continue to be a publisher that does good work in in continuing to reach and stretch in the area of multiethnic publishing. So that's the background on on Every Voice Now. And the podcast, I'll tell you tell the story about the podcast, which is, you know, by no means, again, not my solitary idea, but it's in a way it's a child of the pandemic, because you all remember this, we had initially wanted to launch the whole initiative at the Calvin Festival of Faith and Writing this past year. We were planning to go to Calvin at that big event and have a kind of a big reception or some



way that we could have a big bash or something in person where we could invite all the industry folks to come and learn about the initiative. And you know what, in hindsight, I mean, as much as it would have been great to do that. I am so glad that we did this instead. Because that would have been a fun night. You know, it would have been kind of a fun flash in the pan evening and then maybe it would have just kind of gotten forgotten, faded away. But instead, we shifted to doing this podcast, in part, to do something that would allow us to talk about the initiative and then actually live out the value of trying to elevate authors of color. And now we have all these great stories. And they're continuing on and they will live in perpetuity. And that's exciting to me to see how as much as I have not, none of us have wanted this pandemic. And we would all of course, if we had a choice not have to deal with it, but this is a good that's come out of the pandemic, as we have this podcast. And it's been wonderful.

Ed 15:34

Absolutely. I'm actually looking forward to a both-and. To have the podcast now, but to someday be able to still do that big event, in person.

Helen 15:44

Absolutely. We can still do that. I think. But yes, I like the both-and. That's good.

Ed 15:49

So Every Voice Now is just getting started. But it has still, I mean, already has made a pretty significant impact out there. We've been hearing lots of positive things from authors, agents, other folks in the industry. And in fact, Publishers Weekly recently referenced it positively in an article about diversity in book publishing. What can other publishers learn from IVP's journey in launching an initiative like Every Voice Now?

Helen 16:21

I'm really curious to know how many industry professionals we have listening to our podcast. I feel like if they really truly wanted to understand more about what it means to continue to support authors of color, they should absolutely be listening and subscribing to our podcast, because we're learning so much from our authors about their own publishing journeys, about some of the obstacles they had along the way. We've learned, I've been really blessed to learn how much IVP has been valued for them in their journey and the things that IVP has done well to demonstrate that they care about their voice, they want to shepherd their voice well. There's so much good content in our podcasts for publishing professionals, if they want to get a window into what it means to serve authors of color, well, they absolutely should be subscribing and listening. And of course, you know, that makes it in some ways more



competitive, right? If we give away some of our secrets, but there's a part of me that feels like this will be good for the church overall, if more publishers can understand these values, that's that's not a bad thing. That's a good thing that will help find ways not just at IVP but across the industry where authors of color can feel like they are heard and validated and that their stories are elevated. So I think that yes, publishing professionals should listen to our podcast.

Maila 17:46

Which is, I mean, a good segue to our next question, which is, you wrote this incredible essay for the Asian American Christian Collaborative, which I hope we can link in the show notes. And you titled it, "US demographics Are Changing, and the Publishing Industry Needs to Follow Wuit." And in that essay, you talk about why it's both good business and a faithful expression of the gospel for book publishers to represent this increasingly multiethnic world. And so can you talk, I mean, a little bit more about the essay and what you hope this essay will accomplish?

Helen 18:23

Well, to be completely honest, I wrote the essay, mainly to promote the podcast... ...and what we were doing, so I'll be completely honest there. But given the opportunity, I thought, okay, this will be helpful, I think, to shed light on an industry that those who may not be inside the way we are, might not be able to kind of see the broader strokes. So I was hopeful that it could help paint a little more of a clearer picture on what publishing is like, what it's like in terms of this question about diversity. It may feel very distant or mystical or mystifying, you know, to even break into for those who are on the outside. But I think I'm hoping this came through, I wanted to make clear that publishing needs people of color on all levels at all functions, not just writers, but every level in the industry. So I'm hoping that it gave people some hope. If they are, if there are people who are out there who read that article, who themselves would love to break into the industry, just that knowledge that, hey, the industry needs me in some ways more than I need the industry, there's a lot of areas of need there. So hopefully that gave some folks out there some inspiration and vision for how they could potentially move into the area of publishing. And Christian publishing in particular, I think, tends to lag behind our secular counterparts. I think that our secular counterparts in publishing have been saying for some time now that publishing is a very white industry, it still is. And I think that's even more the case in the Christian subculture. So to name that and to make that make that clear, I thought was really important because we just have to continue to raise the disparities that I think ultimately helps catalyze progress. And like I said earlier, change just doesn't just happen, right? It just, it's not something that will just automatically, oh, overnight, things are going to just shift! It has to come with intentionality and perseverance, especially in publishing where I think change is slow. So efforts like what we're doing here in the podcast,



and continuing to raise awareness, I think all hopefully help and hopefully, will inspire even more people to do what they can to make change happen where they are.

Ed 18:28

It all connects! Well, one of my favorite parts of the essay is when you write, and I'm quoting here, "We pursue diversity, not just for diversity sake, we want to reflect a multiethnic body that is unified and its devotion to Christ, so that the world can know the power of God's love to bridge any and all gaps. No other institution can fully display racial harmony like the church can." That is just so powerful and right on target, Helen, and I'm hoping and praying that not only publishing leaders will embrace that message, but all of us. It's a prophetic message that we all need to live out. Could you give our listeners some counsel, some advice on how to make this commitment to Biblical diversity real in their spheres of influence? I'm imagining, like we said, before, you know that there's folks out there from the publishing industry, there's published authors, aspiring authors, editors, agents, marketing folks, but also pastors, teachers, ministry leaders in general who are listening to us. Could you give us a word to take with us on this important topic?

Helen 21:46

Thank you for highlighting that line. It's something I believe really strongly. I think sometimes in the church, we who care so much about issues of representation, I think sometimes can fall short a little bit because we stop there, we think, okay, representation, that's the goal. If we diversify, that's the goal. And in my mind, that's not the goal. And that way of thinking falls short of how we need to be thinking more broadly about these issues as the church. Because if we're just going to diversify, and we're happy with diversifying, then we're really no different than the rest of the secular world that's trying to do the same. Like once they reach that, well, then what, what's the goal? So I feel like as Christians, we have to take that last leap, right, which is that God has given us this gift of multiethnicity so that, you know, we can demonstrate our unity in Christ. And that's what draws people to him. Right? And I, I still firmly believe this, I think we still have a long way to go as the church to actually demonstrate this, but I don't think any institution but the body of Christ can demonstrate true unity, right, across all barriers, whether we're talking racial, or ethnic, or class or any other kinds of barriers that exist. It's that bond we have in Christ that allows us to cross those differences. And that, I think, is an incredible witness to the world. So that's kind of the purpose, right? That's like the big picture purpose of why we even care about things like diversity and such. And then how does how does that translate to every day or just what people can do? Especially those folks who are in the publishing universe? I would just ask people to ask themselves, you know, how much do they intentionally strive to live a multiethnic life? Look at their friendship circles, look at their professional networks, look at their reading lists, look at the media they consume? Are



we building in ourselves lifestyles that demonstrate that we value different perspectives, we value the voices of people from various backgrounds, and cultures and contexts and, and all those kinds of things. Because as we do that, that increases our ability to demonstrate our witness to Christ. So I think that mindset and having that mindset of trying to live a multiethnic life, and do so intentionally because of the fact that it leads to greater opportunity for witness is something that we can intentionally do. It's something we can take steps to do in our own in our own spheres. And I think that's why when I think about IVP, I mean, IVP's whole mindset and desire to elevate voices of color, it comes from a kind of a longstanding value and internal culture that is committed to multiethnicity. And we're not perfect, but that value is woven so deeply in our DNA as an organization and it's been a huge part of our parent organization's witness for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I mean that commitment to multiethnicity has drawn so many college students into the fold and to meet Jesus. And I think that's true too in what we are trying to do at IVP, and that should be true of all of us in the church and what our life and our work is pointing towards.

Maila 25:11

Well, so good. Wow. Well, I wish we could talk about this more. But we've come to the end of this bonus episode. But before we let you go back to behind the scenes, can you share with our listeners how they can reach you or follow you or just even learn more about what you're doing?

Helen 25:34

Well, sure, you can visit my woefully outdated website which is www.HelenLeeBooks.com and I'm at places like Twitter and Instagram with that same handle @HelenLeeBooks. Twitter's probably the place that I mainly communicate about things like this like topics and ideas of that area of multiethnic publishing; Instagram I mainly use so I can keep in touch with all my boys. Wherever you can find me, there are a zillion Helen Lees out there but there's there's only one HelenLeeBooks so you can find me there.

Maila 26:10

Awesome. Well, you guys know where to find Helen, thank you so much for coming out from behind the scenes and being on the mic today. It was fun to talk to you.

Helen 26:19

My pleasure. I really appreciate both of you and the great work you do and I will be happily behind the scenes continuing to do what I do so you all can shine.

Ed 26:29



Well, thank you Helen and, and thanks to our listeners for putting in the overtime to join us for this bonus episode. We hope you enjoyed it as much as Maila and I did. And please join us next time for another episode of Every Voice Now.

[More About Helen Lee](#)

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About the Hosts:



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Maila is a marketing manager at IVP; she holds a B.A. in English Language & Literature and a B.A. in Communication Studies from the University of Michigan, and an M.A. in Christian Formation & Ministry with a concentration in Bible & Theology from Wheaton College Graduate School. She enjoys photography, growing and caring for her plants, and listening to podcasts such as *This American Life*, *Invisibilia*, and *Unlocking Us*. Follow Maila on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#).

Ed Gilbreath, Co-Host

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