

LitJoy Crate

They stayed up all night talking — and before the conversation was over, Dearth asked Lewis Burrows to be her business partner, and LitJoy Crate was born.

Since the women started the business in 2016, initially setting up in Lewis Burrows' garage, LitJoy Crate has grown into a thriving company that creates custom sub-licensed bookish merchandise, special edition books and more.

The company is part of a growing field of book subscription box services — a facet of publishing that has increased in popularity over the past few years, particularly with women helping transport readers into the magical worlds they know and love.

Dearth and Lewis Burrows are co-CEOs of LitJoy Crate, based in Lehi. The company employs 41 people, and 39 of them are women, said Robin King, LitJoy Crate's business coordinator.

King also said that 90% of LitJoy's customers are women between 18 and 44, "with the bulk between 25 and 34." The company was listed No. 27 in MountainWest Capital Network's list of the fastest-growing companies in Utah, and No. 24 on Inc.com's list of fast-growing companies in the Rocky Mountain region. The company's boxes usually stick to the young-adult, adult fiction and fantasy genres, Lewis Burrows said, along with a few science fiction, romance, classics and women's literature titles.

Among the notable authors and works for which they've crafted items and editions are Stephenie Garber's "Crescent" books, Maas' "A Court of Thorns and Roses" series, J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" books, and romance novels by such authors as Ali Hazelwood and Tessa Bailey.

Lewis Burrows said "literature joy," which inspired the startup, is still core to its mission. "LitJoy's purpose is to cultivate connection and joy through stories," she said.

From garage to warehouse

When they started the company in 2016, the two CEOs had four kids between them. The subscription service took three months to start, from leavening to launch. Most of it happened in Lewis Burrows' house — first in her kitchen, where boxes were stacked to the ceiling, then in her garage.

"The majority of the work that we did was at night, or after the kids went to bed," Lewis Burrows said. "Every now and then, we'd have to get packages out the door in time for USPS pickup, so we'd work late into the night, but then we'd get together the next morning." Even so, the two recalled memories of their kids helping them pack boxes, each one given a section to complete.

"We would just participate with them as much as possible and make it fun," Dearth said. "They were always helped to pick out our children's books, things like that."

From the garage, which everyone at LitJoy had the code to at one point, they graduated to the basement. They soon realized they needed to move into a warehouse space.

"There were times when we were knitting boxes in the garage and then running up and down the stairs to the basement to grab shop orders," Lewis Burrows said. "[It was] this beautiful and chaotic moment when LitJoy really was just like, a hazy portion of my home."

That era is full of start-up associated nostalgia. Back then, they couldn't afford to order specialized boxes for their first specialty crate, so they ordered a rubber stamp and stamped each box themselves, sometimes until the hours of the early morning.

"[It started to get where the stamp] was missing spots, so then we were taking a Sharpie to make sure that it looked really nice," Dearth recalled.

Their first magical crate, which they sold less than 100 of, wasn't part of a subscription. But when they launched their first subscription boxes, they sold to 3,000 customers, King said.

They performed a lot of DIY work then, like the time a publisher sent them five maps for a book, printed on cardstock. The pair thought it didn't look "fantasy enough," so they took lighters to the edges of each map and burned them. They said they sustained a few blisters in the process, but it made the package more exciting for their customers.

When LitJoy first started, King said, they did three to four different crates for different reading levels, like board books, picture books, middle-grade, and young-adult — and those had different themes every month. Their specialty, "magical" crates came along later.



PHOTOS BY RICK EGAN
Above ▶ LitJoy founders Kelly Dearth and Alex Lewis-Burrows are shown with their employees on April 17. At top ▶ The LitJoy headquarters in Lehi.

Eventually, they decided to cut back. Now, they do a subscription box, To Be Read, once every quarter, where customers can customize their box from two or three different book choices, and with different levels of merchandise items to pick from.

"We're the first to do a fully customizable subscription box," Lewis Burrows said. As the company grew, so did their ambitions. "Once we had enough budget, we talked publishers into doing special editions, which they had never done for subscription boxes. Or if they had, it was very limited."

The customized editions are the crown jewel of book boxes everywhere, and what has made the boxes so popular, Lewis Burrows said they told publishers back then they wanted to not only signed copies, but their original cover design, a reversible dust jacket, tipped-in pages and customized end pages.

"When I look back, eight years ago, subscription boxes were barely budding," Dearth said. "When I used to talk about what we did for a company, I always had to back up and explain what a subscription [box] was first. Nobody knew what that meant. [Now,] it's completely changed."

'Do the hard thing'

At the LitJoy Crate warehouse in Lehi, the lobby holds an arch made of books, and under it a bookshelf containing many of the special edition books the company has helped create: popular series like "Red Queen" by Victoria Aveyard, as well as such classics as "Pride and Prejudice," "Wuthering Heights" and "Jane Eyre."

Mindy Widdowson, the warehouse manager, oversees a crew of 10 people who look over shop orders, subscription fulfillment and receiving. "It's kind of a jack-of-all-trades crew," Widdowson said. There are a few "pick and pack" tables, where the boxes and orders are assembled "where we fulfill and make all the magic happen," she said.

Many of LitJoy's employees are readers, and some were customers and fans first.

Debra Hawkins, the director of product development, filmed an unboxing video of the very first LitJoy crate — the first video from a customer that Dearth ever watched. Hawkins also still owns one of those hand-burnt maps from an early box.

The LitJoy staff collectively share their ideas for products and Hawkins is the main matriarch who makes things happen. With special editions, she helps bring the books to life through design and by finding artists, adding touches that only die-hard fans will understand and appreciate.

Approaching the special editions, Hawkins said, "we always start with the source material." The company finds fan artists, Hawkins said, through several channels. There's an online submission form, they take tips from fans on social media and LitJoy gets ideas from its Luncerons Facebook group — which is her favorite.

Hawkins said they keep a growing database of artists to keep up with, even if it takes time for them to contact those artists.

Recently, for example, LitJoy announced a new special edition of Leigh Bardugo's "King of Scars" and "Rule of Wolves" duology. (LitJoy has previously created special editions for Bardugo's other duology, "Six of Crows," and is working on a "Shadow and Bone" trilogy edition — all three series are in the "Grishaverse.")

"King of Scars" and "Rule of Wolves" revolve heavily around three characters — two of them are Zoya Nazarensky and Nikolai Lantsov — and fan-favorite artist Kolayp En specializes in drawing them. Kolayp En has designed tipped-in pages for the duology.

"When we were working on 'King of Scars,' it was absolutely the perfect project to bring her on," Hawkins said of the artist. "We always love adding artists to that database, and we especially love getting it from customers who love our products."

Hawkins said the company likes to push the boundaries of what they can do with special edition design — what she dubs "crazy ideas." "I can think of a couple where we're, like,

"This book is about ghosts, so we want to put the ghosts on a translucent dust jacket and then print the rest of the cover behind it, so the ghosts look like they're see-through." Another example she gives is the metal pieces on their "Vampire Academy" covers.

"There's never this like, squashing of things because of time, energy or commitment that [it's] going to take. It's always like, 'Well, let's try it. Let's do the hard thing,'" Hawkins said.

Kara Hobson, the director of business management, said that attitude is something publishers admire about LitJoy.

"There was a project in particular, and the publishers were just really like, 'We cannot create

the level that LitJoy does, so to do this project, you're going to have to do a sublicense, because we want what you're describing to happen and we know that we can deliver," she said.

Another popular item from LitJoy, Hawkins said, is their collectible keys — which have elaborate designs, and are meant to let readers unlock the magical world to which each key belongs. The keys, she said, are something they are "grateful that customers took a leap of faith with."

"We weren't sure that anyone was going to be as excited as we were to have a key to a fictional place," Hawkins said. "That feeling like you could step into that world and unlock that building, I think, has been really special."

LitJoy also sells decorative items, such as light boxes and bookshelf allies, that have the same thinking behind them — to transport readers into a magical world with one look.

The company also has a podcast, which has featured chats with such authors as Cassandra Clare, Holly Black and Jay Kristoff. Dearth and Lewis Burrows host the podcast, which is coordinated by Brittany Williams, who said, "building community with our viewers is our goal."

Each author also has a different approach to how they work with LitJoy, Lewis Burrows said. For example, she said, Bardugo was very communicative about such things as colors and symbols, while Kristoff wrote more than 700 annotations for their "Nevernight."

What sets LitJoy apart?

Lewis Burrows said she thinks LitJoy works because the company works for their customers so directly.

"Humans just connect so deeply to stories of fiction, because they have such human principles in them... That's where they just feed so seen and heard in stories," she said. "What incentivizes me, in a lot of ways, is LitJoy is always trying to push the envelope in what we produce in the publishing and book world."

Bobbie Granderson, a LitJoy Crate customer in Grand Rapids, Michigan, said the book subscription service has helped her discover a lot of new books in the fantasy genre.

Granderson said she owns a lot of items from the company, but her favorite is her special edition "Mortal Instruments" set — which she called a "top pick" of her book collection.

"The artwork on the flip cover is gorgeous. I love all the different details, how they're coordinated. Each book has the cover art and they're all different, but then coordinated with each cover is the symbols that are sprayed on the edges," she said. "Everything just meshes really well together."

Another thing Granderson said she loves about the LitJoy box is the ability to pick and choose what she wants, which isn't an option with some other book subscription boxes.

"When you have a special edition, it not only gives you so much beauty to look at, to go along with the story, [but it] kind of helps bring the story alive," she said.

LitJoy just announced its first special edition middle-grade project, for Utah author Brandon Mull's "Fablehaven" series.

Eight years on, Dearth said LitJoy still "feels like a giant club, club that also does business on the side — someone."

Dearth added, "When I'm sitting in our warehouse with 40 employees, I'm just like, 'How did that happen?' Last thing I remember, we were in [Alex's] garage with our cute little kids barely carrying one box at a time."

PUZZLE ANSWERS • FIND THE SUDOKU ON D4, OTHER PUZZLES ON D6

Los Angeles Times Crossword

HUSH REGS PSALM GOVE
ONTO TIANA RASTE EMER
TRIVIAL RUN OCTET RAGA
TIN SSNS SOMO ASANAS
EGGOTS WINE AND DIVINE
ABSENCE MELLOW GRATE PIT
GUARVE OF THE BABINO
SILL TAD RAMS ANTE
PLATEAU MAORI APSE
ALICE BOLD POTING GAT
TEAM BULGE MENTORS
UBER DENT BAH UNTO
FORGIVING ANALLING
OTS HANDS IMACPROS
GALILEY SCARE TILNAGAN
PLANET ALOT SYNE INA
EASE INNER POLKADIVOT
AMEN OAKEN ARTIEL PERE
RODS NESTS NETS ADEIN

Theme Crossword

PASHA SNAIL EPIC DAMS
ALICE TILNAGAN ALOT
WHETHER THEY DRAY MATA
MORALE OPE GENERIC
STARRY EVERETT LINDLIFE
BAKE ASTER ANNAS
USE PARTIAL GREEN BOB
THERE NOT GOLV ELEE
SIS ARROW MALEN AMOLE
DRE HONEST LINER
SHOW COMPUTER SHOULD BE
AIRED RUNES PISAN EERN
ANDS RES JACKANDREY
CEE SWAPS SERBIA OGEE
ALWAYS CLAIM SMELT
CONSIL DERIDAN STARS
ABETTOR ICY DETAIN
RAVE WARD ENEMY PLANET
OMER ETTE RIVAL ETUDE
BARN DEER SPICE DENSE

Sudoku

C O E 8 9 6 2 1 F B 5 D 7 3 A 4
B 6 2 5 7 0 D 8 C 4 A 3 E 9 1 F
F 7 1 3 C A B 4 8 9 0 E 6 2 5 D
D A 4 9 E F 3 5 7 2 1 6 C 8 B 0
9 D 3 4 8 5 E 0 A F 6 2 1 C 7 B
E 5 6 0 1 3 4 C B D 8 7 A F 2 9
2 C B 1 A 9 F 7 4 0 3 5 D 6 E 8
A 8 7 F D B 6 2 1 E 9 0 4 5 0 3
0 3 C A 2 E 8 8 D 5 4 9 F 1 6 7
8 1 5 7 6 D C F 2 3 E 8 0 4 9 A
6 8 9 2 4 7 A 3 0 8 F 1 5 D G E
4 F D E 5 1 0 9 6 7 C A 8 B 3 2
1 E 8 B 0 2 9 A 5 6 D 4 3 7 F C
3 4 F 6 B C 1 E 9 A 7 8 2 D 0 5
7 9 A 0 F 8 5 6 3 C 2 B 9 A 4 1
5 2 0 C 3 4 7 D E 1 0 F 8 A 8 6

Jumble

HONCHO
GOTTEN
UNCLOG
LOSSY
IRONIC
SPIFFY
The message would be over after a few...
FINISHING
TOUCHES
Wuzzles
1. Weirdest
2. One at a time