Marketing the Macabre

From a vampire-slaying-sword auction to wine tastings with fans, Leslie ESDAILE BANKS W’80 has used her WHARTON training (and an almost supernatural business sense) to promote her bestselling book series.

By Susan Frith
It was a book signing that threatened to flop. Authors dressed in diamonds and spiked heels were sitting in the middle of a Wal-Mart in central Ohio, waiting for shoppers to visit their tables. But the potential customers had long shopping lists and crying kids in their carts.

“They would see the tables, freeze, and go in the other direction,” recalls Leslie Esdaile Banks W’80, who was poised—minus the glitz—to autograph installments from her best-selling Vampire Huntress Legend series.

“I said, ‘We’ve got to change the way we do things, people,’” says Banks, who writes under several pen names, including L.A. Banks. She began putting flyers on shoppers’ carts. “We’ve got candy!” she told them. “We’re having fun! Come bring your family.” Soon, the other authors got the nerve to emerge from their paperback fortresses and customers flocked to meet them.

“A couple of times people left their cart with their child in it to take off down the aisle and find whomever [they wanted to meet me],” Banks says, laughing. “I was like, ‘You don’t know me from a can of paint!’ Oh my goodness. I’ve got a baby on my hip and I’m signing books. It was wild! I had people say, ‘Wait a minute! My girlfriend reads your books …’ And they’d hand me their cell phone: ‘Here, tell my girlfriend something!’”

One author’s headline. Banks’ element. “I do enjoy it.”

Before becoming a full-time writer of horror, romance, crime and suspense, and other genres in the trade-paperback realm, Banks cut her fangs on sales for Fortune 100 companies. “We were always taught not to be afraid of rejection and that you had to make it easier for the customer to approach you and to buy something,” she says. Her marketing spunk has helped spur more than 1.2 million in sales for her 12-book vampire series, whose final installment is due out in February, Banks has earned a commendation this year as one of Pennsylvania’s 50 Best Women in Business, the 2008 Storyteller of the Year award from Essence Magazine, and the loyalty of some enthusiastic fans. Two of her books, Minion and The Awakening, have been optioned for film, and the series is coming out in the popular Japanese comic form known as manga. That’s not to mention all the product tie-ins (anyone in need of a one-of-a-kind vampire-slaying Madame Isis hero sword?), promotional events (how about a vampire wine tasting backstage at the Annenberg Center?), and chat-room conversations she’s cultivated to keep the buzz going about her books.

“If you’re not showing sales at the big box chains, they don’t want to hear it,” Banks explains. “The entrepreneurial stuff you do spikes your sales, which guarantees you can write pretty much what you want if you can sell it. So it’s back to the old Wharton model.”

Banks’ series tells the story of Damali Richards, an African-American female and a Latino male, two markets that were vastly underserved at the time. The editor who actually bought the book (Slow Burn) said, “That’s a combination we haven’t seen yet. That combo is hot right now.”

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One book led to another, though not enough money to quit her various day jobs, which included, at different points, teaching entrepreneurship to small-business people as well as those recovering from crack addictions, and directing a program that granted small loans to women and minority-owned businesses.
Then a friend put her in touch with literary agent Manie Barron. Barron was not a fan of romance fiction, but Banks had done some work that touched on the paranormal. “I told her I thought the world was ready for horror for African-American audiences,” he says.

He showed one of her manuscripts to St. Martin’s Press senior editor Monique Patterson, who couldn’t find support in house for that particular book, but was interested in seeing more of Banks’ work. Over lunch Barron started spinning an irresistible premise: “How about a vampire slayer who’s kind of like a black Buffy?” (referring to the heroine of the popular TV series Buffy the Vampire Slayer).

“When can I see it?” Patterson asked.

Banks came back the next day with 25 pages that would become the opening fight scene in Minion, the first book of the Vampire Huntress Legend series.

“It was so wildly imaginative, so vividly real and fantastic,” recalls Patterson. “It was what I was looking for. And it went on from there.”

“She is a force of nature,” Barron says. “Sometimes I wonder if she is a force of the supernatural.” He adds, “You would never think that someone who wrote these kinds of things was as vivacious and has such a joie de vivre as Leslie does. She is an amazing woman who puts as much energy into trying to sell her books as she does writing them.”

It helps that vampire fiction continues to be a hot seller (though you’ll find plenty of debate about whether the market is oversaturated). The bookshelves brim with hemicophobic vampires, blood-sucking NASCAR drivers, boarding-school biters, and history-travelers. Charlaine Harris’s “Southern Vampire” novels have recently been adapted for television in HBO’s True Blood series.

According to Patricia Altnor, a vampire buff and librarian from Columbia, Maryland (http://patricias-vampire-notes.blogspot.com/), the genre has definitely grown since she published her bibliography of vampire works, Vampire Readings, in 1998. Because of the proliferation of vampire series and e-books, “It’s just impossible to keep up with what is out there now,” Altnor says. Since 2000 she’s compiled about 500 additional works in an “Online Vampire Bibliography,” but she knows it is not all-inclusive.

She recently read Banks’ The Darkness. “I think she’s a marvelous writer,” Altnor says. “She’s very popular, though I don’t know if she’s as popular as she should be.”

From her reading of other books in the genre, Altnor notes that today’s vampires are less figures of terror and more often the subject of romance, erotica, and humor. (Mary Janice Davidson’s Undead and Unwed, for example, portrays the life of a shallow, single, clothing-obsessed vampire.)

Banks also is trying to do something different with the multicultural approach she takes to her stories, Altnor criticizes. “She brings in people from all backgrounds and all religions for this Armageddon that is approaching.”

Banks thinks the vampire sub-genre has particular appeal “at times when people are feeling powerless and like there’s a conspiracy against them in government or business, and by doing the right thing, the good guys didn’t win. It’s a sexy fantasy that you could become mist and blow through the window and have eternal life,” she says. “And those who really piss you off, you could just rip their hearts out.” (Not that the real Leslie Esdaile Banks would do that. Her blog postings are full of smiles, bless you’s, and descriptions of having “mad-crazy fun” with her friends and fans.)

Dr. Nina Auerbach, Penn’s John Welsh Centennial Professor of English, is not familiar with Banks’ work, though she steeped herself in the literature of the Dracula’s predecessors and successors while researching her 1995 cultural critique, Our Vampires, Ourselves. “Vampires always seem to reflect the time they’re in and I think that’s why they survive,” she says. “They take the shape of their decade.”

Adding to their appeal is the notion that “they’re really on the cusp between death and undeath,” Auerbach says. “The original title of Dracula was The Dead Undead, and that’s really an interesting thing to be.”

Auerbach confesses that she’s gotten “vampired out” after all the research she did for her own book, though “we’re still friends, vampires and me.” When she looked up summaries of Banks’ work on Amazon.com, she was struck by their “biblical” nature. “That’s a whole new twist as far as I know. The vampires I knew used to be very secular.”

Even though her books are works of fantasy, Banks says it’s impossible to separate her personal views from the writing process. “I’ve been on panels with other vampire writers and we all tend to write what our particular rant of the day is,” she says. “Even if you have the most ghoulish antihero, you’ll find that the justice you impose on that character will come from your belief system.”

Banks says she loosely modeled her books’ vampire council on corporations like Halliburton. “The vampires happen to be old white men in hell, pulling the strings globally for war, and they drink black blood, which models oil. And I have a problem with gangland violence, especially in Philadelphia. So I made the drug dealers vampires, too. My team of superheroes—the Guardians of the Light—at one point they look at each other and say we could do this all of our lives and we could blow away these vampires, but they’re going to keep coming back unless we find the systemic cause of where they’re coming from.”

Whatever her personal philosophy is, Banks’ community involvement likely contributed to her selection as one of Pennsylvania’s Best 50 Women in Business—an honor.
bestowed each year by the Department of Community and Economic Development. “I don’t just sit in my office as a hermit and send my books to the publisher,” Banks says. She’s spoken at prisons and other places to promote literacy in the community, and even helped create a curriculum for high-school students at the request of a couple of North Miami teachers who were struggling to get urban kids to read fantasy novels. They liked the books’ “anti-drug, responsible-sex” messages and the fact that the main character abstains from sex until she’s an adult. (As a Neteru, she must do so to allow her powers to fully ripen.) “I’m so sick of seeing these young girls running around here getting pregnant before they can finish college,” Banks says. “It ruins their superpowers.”

On the way to acquiring her own superpowers, Banks grew up at 48th and Osage—essentially in Penn’s backyard. Her father, who worked for the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, “used to fuss all the time about how it wasn’t fair how the students kind of took over the area and they didn’t have a sense of community and they got preferential treatment by the cops and everybody else,” she says. “Yet once I became a student down the street, he was so proud of [his] daughter going to Penn. It was totally a love-hate relationship.”

Her parents had saved $2,500 to send Banks to college, and now she was looking at a $25,000 student loan to pay back. As a marketing and management major, she chose the most lucrative path open to her and went to work for Xerox. Ultimately, it helped her lop off the loan debt, and more.

The Wharton and corporate training she received “kept me understanding that [writing] was a business and what I was creating was a product for a specific market,” Banks says.

A Neteru may be born every thousand years, but Banks has to birth a book every six months. Add to that the job of marketing, which is many writers’ least favorite part of the process. To Banks it comes as second nature.

The quick production schedule puts her in close touch with her readers’ wishes, because while they’re dissecting her latest book online, she’s rushing to finish the next one. “You get in a lot of chat rooms where people rave about who they love to hate and who they’re afraid for,” Banks says. “I’m thinking, ‘Oh man, I’m going to have to kill [these characters] and then bring them back.’ When you’re doing it every six months it’s almost giving people real time and people are thrilled with what they perceive as real events in the books. Whether it’s Hurricane Katrina or the tsunami, I can put that in there.”

Banks has cultivated reader interest by sponsoring contests to name characters in her books and using a range of online marketing tools, from Twitter to Facebook. To celebrate the release of the final book in the VHL series in February, Banks plans a “big, blowout weekend” involving Philadelphia sites that she mentions in her books, such as Constitution Hall and the Clef Club. During the Comic-Con International in San Diego, Banks teamed up with Devil’s Candy Store to arrange the charitable auction of a one-of-a-kind, artist-designed Madame Isis sword (Damali’s special vampire-slaying weapon). She also sold smaller Isis daggers, Damali-inspired jewelry, and coffee-table books featuring artists’ interpretations of the VHL series’ characters.

Not every marketing tactic goes according to plan. When Banks arranged for some promotional trailers to go up on YouTube, some of her readers were steamed by their less-than cinematic quality (and, perhaps, by the fact that the tight abs possessed by the book cover heroine weren’t reflected in the hoodie-wearing actress obtained for the video). Typical comments: “OH PLEASE. That better not be Carlos Rivera … I just want to shoot this video … Damali is WAY better looking on the covers than that.”

“People have been visceral about the YouTube thing,” Banks says. “People have been clamoring for a movie and there is no way for what it is that those things cost that they’re going to get an Angelina Jolie trailer. It makes me tickled, though. For all the personal drama that has occurred, what they’ve done is driven traffic to the site. The controversy has actually been a benefit.”
It helps that Banks has assembled a core group of avid readers from Detroit to Atlanta who are quick to promote—and defend—her. Her “Street Team,” as she refers to them, includes folks like LaShonda Bates, a 37-year-old medical support assistant from Fort Gordon, Georgia.

Bates describes her favorite VHL character, a Guardian named Big Mike: “He’s like 6’5”, bald head, chocolate skin—and Oh Lord Jesus he’s like the strong and quiet, deep country Down South brother, the brother who likes to eat corn bread and gravy and biscuits. And he’s got a big heart. If he was real, he would give my husband a run for his money.”

“The way she writes about her characters, you get so lost in the books, you think they’re real,” Bates adds. She recalls one Street Team member calling her up in a state of panic when she learned that Damali was in danger of betraying Carlos with Cain (yes, that ne’er-do-well). Bates, who had finished the book, wouldn’t give away the ending. Then her phone rang again. It was the same friend.

“She was saying, ‘Please tell me she’s not gonna get with that brother.’” Bates was firm: “You’ve got to read the book.”

Now president of Banks’ fan club, Bates discovered her books while living with her husband in Germany, where he was stationed in the military. When they returned to the United States, she looked up her new favorite author at a sci-fi conference in Atlanta. “I had a groupie moment,” she says. “It’s like when you meet somebody famous and you go, ‘Oh my God, it’s you, I can’t believe it! I have all your stuff …’” Banks gave her a big hug. “She was so down to earth … She’s like one of your girlfriends. There’s never a snub moment.”

The Street Team members make a point of attending Banks’ promotional events, fete-ing and feeding her as she travels around the country on book tours (see her July 21 blogposting for an exuberant description of various on-the-road “foodgasms” http://leslieesdailebanks.com/blog/), prodding bookstores to shelve Banks’ work in multiple places—not just in the African-American section—and talking up her books in online forums. (Bates takes credit for turning a Scottish reader onto Banks’ works—a reader who is now a Street Team member herself.)

When Essence magazine announced the slate of nominees for its Storyteller of the Year Award and excluded Banks, Bates and others from the Street Team threatened to cancel their subscriptions. She was added to the ballot and the team successfully rallied readers to vote for her online. “If you’re a die-hard fan, you’re going to go the extra mile to make sure they get the kudos they deserve,” Bates explains.

Hallowed-earth sandbags got piled in strategic rings well beyond the castle gates, wired with remote, cell phone-activated C-4. Trenches with wooden stake pikes got dug and covered with a camouflage of weathered grass. Catapults were raised at the four corners inside the gates, bearing five-gallon jugs of holy water bombs. Garden hoses became the purveyor of liquid fire connected to blessed water tanks.

... Then near sundown, it was time to pray.

To the east Muslims knelt on small prayer mats and made their peace with Allah. Buddhists sat in quiet repose, murmuring mantras. Jews knelt beside Christians, each communing with the Almighty in their own way. Shamans walked off into the trees and left talismans. Orisha altars were covered with fruit. Candles were lit in small votives. Incense filtered up from the cardinal points. Each and every combination of devotion was observed, linked all warriors in the single request: Let us win without sustaining heavy casualties. Let everyone go home to their family whole. (The Wicked)

When your characters start preparing for Armageddon, it’s probably a good time to wrap things up. Banks didn’t want to run her vampire series into the ground.

Her publisher had one question: Can you do werewolves?

Banks agreed and has written three books in a six-book series called Crimson Moon. The first installment, Bad Blood, came out in April. “So now I’m going to the dogs,” she jokes. “It’s been a time of transitions for Banks, whose daughter graduated from high school in May. She’ll be attending University of the Sciences in the fall.

Banks’ ex-husband, with whom she is still friends, also was present for their daughter’s Commencement. “At one point we just stood together, saying, ‘Did you think we’d be here?’ Because this is a kid that almost died. I feel blessed, blessed, blessed that she has done so well.”

With college tuition to pay for, readers can count on Banks’ prolific publishing habits to continue. She admits to a certain amount of “empty-nest syndrome” after finishing the vampire series, but werewolves offer “a chance to world-build all over again,” she says. “When you’re doing a supernatural story, you have to create all of the rules and the caste system and superpowers. That’s the fun creative aspect that’s such a joy.”

Knowing Banks, she’s likely to make that joy in whatever plotline she finds herself immersed.

Susan Frith, a freelance writer and former Gazette staffer, last wrote for the magazine on the Trustees Council of Penn Women in the July/August issue.