

# Father-daughter duo build DeeClare It, books with a message

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Deneen Matthews can remember her father, Clarence Matthews, 89, coming home from his job at PS 14 in Jersey City and being angry.

"He sees parents who are dropping off the children ... the kids with \$200 sneakers on their feet, but that was about all you could know about them," Deneen Matthews said. "He was like, 'Why are we doing that to our children?' And then he was saying children need to learn how to earn, learn how to start thinking about how to participate (in society)."

It was about 14 years ago, said Deneen, that her father told her he was seriously thinking about writing a book. "I said, 'OK, well, if you write it, I'll publish it.'"

Clarence Matthews was a little surprised his daughter was familiar

with that world. But Deneen worked as a graphic designer and had clients who were pulling their books from publishers like Random House and self-publishing them, she said. And as someone who grew up in Jersey City and was a longtime resident, she shared her father's hopes to create work, and a platform for it, that spoke to the voids in communal values they both saw growing first-hand.

That enterprise became DeeClare It Publishers & Village Mart, where all of their titles are available via [declareit.com](http://declareit.com).

Clarence Matthew's first series of books were the "Rites of Passage" trilogy, historical fiction that follows the journey of

antagonist Jacob from youth to adulthood. It mirrors Clarence Matthews' own journey from his Depression-era youth in North Carolina.

"I based my books on where I came from and the kind of things I observed growing up in the country in the South and then (up north) in the city, Newark and Jersey City," Matthews said. "Youth now don't know from where they came. They don't know the struggles some parents and grandparents had to go through to get them to the point where they are now."

Growing up, Matthews was the only one of his siblings who went to school.

"I was the youngest of four children and the other ones had to stay out and work the farm share-cropping. (As the youngest), my mother made sure that I went to school.

The family who owned the property where we lived — they had a son that was about my age, and my mother said to me, 'Every day that he goes to school, you will go to school also.' And she would make sure I went. ... It was about a two-mile walk. She would walk with me and then pick me up after school."

That was through the fourth grade. When the family then moved to the city, Matthews was the only one of his siblings who could keep up in class

"We're not exactly the same as mainstream public publishing houses who own a part of your book," Deneen Matthews said. "We don't take any residuals or anything of that nature, which is what really makes us different. But we can provide the services our authors need."



REENA ROSE SIBAYAN JOURNAL PHOTO

**AUTHOR CLARENCE MATTHEWS, 89**, of Jersey City, photographed in his Wade Street home with the seven books he and his daughter, Deneen, published together.

After the "Rights of Passage" trilogy was released, her father wanted to highlight the dynamic he had with his siblings.

"They were children who grew up at a time that there were challenges far beyond what they could understand," Deneen Matthews said. "But they wanted to participate with helping their families. They wanted to earn money, so they found ways to do that. So I thought about it and I said, well, we can call them 'Biz Kids' and while giving stories about their entrepreneurial adventures, they also teach the foundation of character building. There's some teaching elements, some historical facts, and it's a little bit of everything in those books for young people."

A modern example of the kind of entrepreneurial skills these books embody is kids in groups who sell individual packs of candy from multi-packs.

"That also encompasses a mindset where you have to take risks and you have to be courageous," she said. "You have to have some real character under-girding that because you're going have to deal with the rejections and hopefully you have a

support system at home that says, 'Hey. It's OK. You know, maybe that didn't work out, but ... if you have somebody helping you, you might not have to (upsell) a 50-cent bag of candy.'"

DeeClare It has published two children authors, 8 and 10, who speak to issues like bullying and problem-solving. The parents of these authors reached out to DeeClare It through social media and that gives Deneen hope, she said, about the kind of ground-up, pragmatic imagination she hopes DeeClare It titles will nurture in youth.

"But we need the community's help," Deneen said. "... You know, people tell children to use their imagination. Well, I'm sorry Jimmy's not going fly to the moon on the pencil. I mean, entertaining is fine, but it's not real. But realistic things that our children can really see themselves doing? Hey, that's a really good idea. You know, 'I likesuch and such' and what could they do with that (where) there's a real possibility that if they apply themselves they can and then ... if nothing else ... you're going learn something before you close the book."