MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR: John Cutrone, 43; Seth Thompson, 34

Duo's exhibit offers glimpse into business of book arts

By LADY HEREFORD
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

The art of making books by hand has taken John Cutrone and Seth Thompson from Maine to Florida and quite a few places in between.

For that reason, the founders of Lake Worth-based Convivio Bookworks named their first exhibit, Long Way to Travel, after the Woody Guthrie song. The retrospective, in the Library Gallery at Florida Atlantic University's John D. MacArthur Campus in Jupiter through Jan. 20, features books printed by letterpress as well as broadsides, or items printed on one side of a sheet of paper.

Many of the broadsides, which can be framed, feature artwork plus quotations or literary passages. Among the duo's collection are miniature books, books with pages that fold out, and books with unusual items tucked within the pages.

"I've always liked interesting books," said Cutrone, 43, a native of Valley Stream, N.Y., who grew up in South Florida. "When you see something that catches your eye, it leaves an impression."

Cutrone and Thompson are full-time employees of FAU's Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts on the university's main campus in Boca Raton. They live in Lake Worth and dedicate their free time to Convivio (www.conviviobookworks.com), their home-based studio formerly known as Red Wagon Press.

The name Convivio is an Italian word that means feast or banquet. "A lot of what we do is centered around tradition," Cutrone said. "It just seemed like a good fit."

Cutrone, who is the program coordinator for the Jaffe Center, said he developed an interest in the book arts while majoring in English and art at FAU. He later studied book arts as a graduate student at the University of Alabama.

He started printing and binding books in 1984 and met Thompson a year later. At the 1986, Thompson moved to Lake Worth from Maine after Cutrone bought a home here seven years ago. During the late 1990s, Cutrone spent two summers doing printing projects in a Shaker community in New Gloucester, Maine, near Thompson's hometown. Those books are among the 20 printed works on display during the exhibition.

The show also features the duo's latest book, Works on Paper, a book of poetry by Shin Yeh and a broadside featuring a poem by Iraqi poet Za'id Shiah.

Convivio Bookworks donated most of the broadsides of Shiah's poem, titled From Occident to Orient, to the Mutanabbi Street Coalition, which uses proceeds from the sale of each broadside to benefit Doctors Without Borders in Iraq. Mutanabbi Street was the center of book-selling in Baghdad until a bomb attack destroyed it earlier this year.

Of the copies that remain, Cutrone and Thompson plan to donate 50 percent of the $5 selling price to Doctors Without Borders.

Thompson and Cutrone do much of their work on antique printing equipment that they acquired over the years from others in the business. There is a tight community of book artists and printers nationwide, Cutrone said, and they frequently stay in touch through the Internet.

It is an art that is about preserving things that are in danger of passing away, Cutrone said. "It's something that's not being done by a lot of people anymore."