

A Non-Profit Group Gives Millions of Needy Children 'Room to Read'



Children in Bangladesh with books supplied by Room to Read. (Room to Read)

This is As It Is.

Welcome back. I'm Caty Weaver.

On today's show, we talk about two educational programs for children, thousands of miles apart. We also remember an important event in American history that changed the way children are educated in the United States.

Room to Read

Almost 800 million people in the world are illiterate, meaning they cannot read and write. Most are in developing countries and more than 65 percent of them are female.

A former official with the Microsoft company is helping to lower those

numbers. John Wood has opened 1,650 schools and 15,000 libraries in some of the world's poorest communities. Avi Arditti has more on the man and his "Room to Read" campaign.

"The thing I learned at Microsoft was that bold goals attract bold people. From the very beginning, I said Room to Read's goal was to reach ten million children around the world in the poorest countries."



Figure 1 Room to Read founder John Wood reads to a girl in Nepal. (Andrea McTamaney)

That is former Microsoft executive John Wood. In 1998, while he was still with Microsoft, Mr. Wood went on a three week walking trip in Nepal. While there, the businessman met a man who led a school in a mountain village. The man asked him to visit the school.

John Wood said the experience changed his life.

"This headmaster has 450 students at the school, but he didn't have any books. He had a library that was completely empty."

Mr. Wood promised to fill the library.

One year later, he returned to the village with a team of yaks carrying bags filled with books -- 3,000 of them. But that was just the start. John Wood retired from Microsoft, and used some of his wealth to start Room to Read. The not-for-profit organization is based on the belief that world change begins with educated children. Today the group operates in ten countries across Africa and Asia.

"It's amazing what we've accomplished. We've built a world-class organization that's really a thought-leader on solutions for education in the developing world."

That is Erin Ganju, co-founder and chief executive of Room to Read. She says that world literacy is the group's first goal. But she says equality of the sexes is just as important. Ms. Ganju says Room to Read pays for a long term girls' education program to help girls empower themselves.

“It really focuses on not only keeping girls in school longer -- through the end of secondary school – but helps support them holistically. We bring female mentors into the communities that act as role models for the girls and we provide them with life skills workshops after school, where they learn critical skills such as goal-setting, leadership skills, problem-solving and they really become different.”

John Wood says local involvement is needed for the program to be successful. Room to Read donates money and provides books. But communities donate land, parents help build the schools and ministries of education agree to pay teachers and librarians.

Room to Read also has set up local printing plants that produce children’s books. Local writers write the books. Local artists draw the pictures for them.

John Wood says Room to Read will have published 1,000 books in over 20 languages by the end of this year.

“I often joke that Room to Read is the biggest children’s publisher you’ve never heard of because your children probably are not reading in the languages that we’re publishing in. But, those children in Vietnam, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, South Africa, they deserve to have books in their mother tongue just as kids here in America do.”

Agnes is a Room to Read teacher in Zambia who also runs a library.

“I’m very proud because I have seen that the literacy level of reading at this school -- even in my class -- it has really improved. I’m happy for that and that is why I can’t let it go. I have to work hard and make sure that every pupil can benefit from the library.”

John Wood says that Room to Read faces huge demand.

“So what drives me is really the idea of our strong local teams at Room to Read should not be in the business of saying ‘no’ or ‘not yet.’ They should be in the business of saying ‘yes.’ Yes to your community having literacy programs. Yes to your girls being empowered by education. Yes to every child having a place in a school that is well run and has really good teachers, and I am not going to give up on the goal.”

Room to Read is expected to reach ten million children by 2015. That is five years earlier than John Wood promised.

I'm Avi Arditti.

A Sale for Children, By Children

Some young children are learning what it is like to operate their own business at a museum in Pasadena, California. The children sell their unwanted toys, clothing and other used goods at the Kidspace flea market. Some of the young business owners even sell things they made.

As Christopher Cruise tells us, the children gain valuable experience and even earn some money.

Nine-year-old Tyler Ruste is working hard.

"Hello. Welcome to Tyler's Treasures."

"How much is this?"

"For that one? Two dollars."

"Give him two."

"Thanks you, and you can get whatever you want at Tyler's Treasures."

Tyler is hoping to earn money at the flea market. Two times a year, young people set up tables and lay out old toys, clothing, sports equipment and other things to sell. The sale is held on the grounds of the Kidspace Children's Museum in Pasadena.

The museum launched the flea market seven years ago. Museum official Julianne Sando says the idea was to provide young children with realistic business experience.

"It's teaching about money and handling money...just basically how to be independent in the world that we live in."

But there are other things to learn. Tyler's older sister, Alyssa, sells sweets that took days to make.

"Well, patience is one of the things you should learn from experience, because sometimes buyers don't always buy all your things and yeah."

The young businesspeople say they get to decide what to sell and at what price. They also get to keep all the money they receive from their sales. Seller Savannah Chavez is thinking about what to do with her profits.

“Maybe I’ll just buy my dream hotel or maybe I’ll just buy a new electronic game.”

Tyler Ruste has a different plan.

“Actually me and my sister, we are going to split the money and put it in into our bank accounts.”

Many parents say they are happy if their children earn a little money. But they also hope the boys and girls will learn mathematics skills and become more sure of themselves as they operate businesses.

A Historic Ruling

Now, a look back in time. On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court made a decision that changed American education forever. The court decided that racial separation in public schools is unconstitutional.



Figure 2 Detail of the West Facade of the U.S. Supreme Court, Washington.

The case was called “Brown versus the Topeka, Kansas Board of Education.” The court ruled against what was, at the time, the accepted policy of having “separate but equal” school systems – one for whites and one for blacks. It found that the policy violated the constitutional guarantee of equal treatment under the law.

The ruling banned the use of racially segregated public school systems across the nation. In other words, it required racially mixed schools.

And that’s As It Is, for today. I’m Caty Weaver.

Write to us and tell us what you think of As It Is. What issues would you like to hear about on our show. Send an email to special@voanews.com.

