

Hello, again. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Today we report on the latest efforts to repair one of the most recognizable sites in the world. And we'll travel to Nepal to hear about one man's efforts to teach reading and writing to millions of people around the world. The program is called As It Is, and we are happy you joined us.

The Washington Monument rises 169 meters over the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The grayish white stone structure is called an obelisk, with the top shaped similar to that of a pyramid. The obelisk honors George Washington. He led colonial forces that helped America win independence from England and served as the new country's first president from 1789 to 1797.

For many years, the marble and granite structure has been a favorite of the public. Millions of people have visited the monument, which had its first stone placed on July 4th, 1848. Its image in photographs and on postcards travels around the world.

On a warm summer day in 2011, an earthquake of 5-point-8 strength shook the Washington, D.C. area. The quake was centered in Virginia, and was felt in several other states. Two tall landmark structures in the District of Columbia suffered major damage. One was the Washington National Cathedral. The other was the Washington Monument.

Cracks opened in the obelisk as pieces of stone shook loose from the quake. One crack was large enough so that from the inside, daylight could be seen through it. Soon after the quake, workers took off some pieces near the top to prevent them from falling.

Carol Bradley Johnson is a spokesperson for the National Park Service, the NPS. The agency operates the monument and other memorials on the Mall. She was at the NPS headquarters when the earth started to shake. She remembers that NPS staff members went into action quickly.

“We were concerned about all our memorials. And immediately we went out and checked to see what had happened. And obviously, particularly the Washington monument because we knew there was quite a bit of debris falling at the very top. We knew pretty quickly that that was going to be a problem.”

The weather did not cooperate with efforts to find all the damage to the monument. Just days after the earthquake, on August 29, Washington suffered the effects of the storm that had been Hurricane Irene. The inside of the monument had to be protected from rainwater.

When the winds died, inspections showed that the worst damage took place above 122 meters. Since those early post-earthquake days, about 50 patches – small pieces of material – have been fixed onto broken places to reinforce them. Several months ago, workers placed thousands of pieces of scaffolding on the high structure. The scaffolding is made of aluminum and steel, and was used inside as well as outside to protect the stone.

Now almost two years of inspections and preparations have made possible a push toward complete restoration. The Washington Monument is expected to open to the public again next spring.

Almost 800 million people in the world are illiterate. That means 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."

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."

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 Arditi.

And I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. On this date in 1927, the most popular song in the world was "born." Mildred J. Hill of Louisville, Kentucky, wrote "Happy Birthday to You."

That's all for this edition of As It is. There are more Learning English programs just ahead, and world news at the beginning of the hour.

