

# Plan aims to help the world to read

## Former Microsoft executive was shocked by Nepalese school's library

Rebecca Wigod, Vancouver Sun

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John Wood boasts that the organization he founded to bring literacy to developing countries is opening school libraries in Asia and Africa faster than Starbucks is opening coffee shops.

At the home of University of B.C. president Stephen Toope this week, the former Microsoft executive and superstar philanthropist jokingly told donors to his non-profit organization, Room to Read: "We are taking [Starbucks CEO] Howard Schultz down, people."

The crowd cheered as Wood, author of the inspirational 2006 memoir, *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*, reeled off Room to Read's accomplishments since the year 2000.

**"We are opening libraries at an insanely rapid rate. In 2007, we opened 1,600 school libraries -- four new libraries each and every day.**

"We have opened 444 schools across the developing world in the last seven years. This year, we go bigger and open 250 new schools -- five new schools per week."

Wood's epiphany came in 1998, when he was trekking in Nepal. He visited a school whose headmaster proudly showed him its library. It was a bare, unfurnished room and its few books -- backpackers' castoffs, unsuitable for children -- were locked in a cupboard so the 450 students wouldn't damage them.

When Wood registered dismay, the headmaster ventured: "Perhaps, sir, you will one day come back with books."

Wood took up the challenge. He and his septuagenarian father brought 3,000 books to Nepal and, renting a yak for the equivalent of \$5 a day, handed them out.

He decided to leave his high-paying job ("I wanted to do something with my good fortune, I had enough to take a risk") and apply business principles, such as leveraging and scalability, to achieving philanthropic ends.

Three statistics from the developing world that would depress most people serve to motivate him. The first is that 110 million children of primary-school age aren't enrolled in school. The second is that 800 million people, or one-seventh of humanity, can't read or write. Lastly, there's the fact that two-thirds of both those groups are girls and women.

Wood, who is 44 and lives in San Francisco, urged listeners with "excess liquidity" to support his cause, saying a mere \$250 can pay a girl's school fees for a year.

One Vancouver enthusiast is Praveen Varshney, of Varshney Capital Corp. His contributions have built 11 libraries in India. Two more are Shu Lui and Richa Misra. Lui helped to organize a Live-in for Literacy, during which Misra and friend Anita Bernardo camped inside UBC's Koerner Library for 10 days in January, collecting \$5,000 in donations for Room to Read. "This is one way I can help," said Misra.

Sharon Davis, who heads the Vancouver Room to Read chapter with Lisa Clement and Joyce Reid, said Wood's presentation elicited "some very large verbal commitments, far larger than expected," which should materialize over the next month.