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The magazine cover features a large, bold title 'Options' in blue and white, with the subtitle 'LIFE • STYLE • LEISURE' in smaller white text. The background is a photograph of John Wood, a man in a light blue shirt, smiling and sitting at a table. The cover includes several headlines and sub-headlines in blue and black text.

**Options**  
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**Imagined spaces**  
Louis Vuitton's *Landscape Memories* exhibition explores the idea of the landscape as a storehouse of memories

**Galloping into Sentosa**  
Ferrari distributor Ital Auto hosts its second Golf Day at Serapong course

**Bigger and better**  
Toyota's RAV4 has grown with its customers

**Educating the world**  
John Wood gave up his career at Microsoft 12 years ago to develop Room to Read, a programme that seeks to offer every child an equal opportunity in education

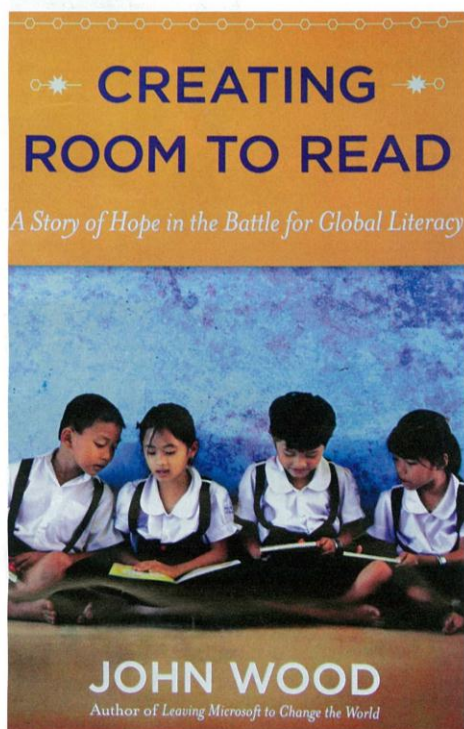




## THE ASCOTT INTERVIEW



Wood reading with children in Vietnam, some of whom have never seen brightly coloured children's books before



Wood's latest book has been hailed as 'a blueprint for transforming lives... and eventually the world'

# Educating the world

John Wood gave up his career at Microsoft to develop Room to Read, a programme that seeks to offer every child an equal opportunity in education. He is opening libraries and schools where they are needed.

| BY AUDREY SIMON |

For most people, returning home from a holiday means putting away the souvenirs purchased and filing away all the images to be looked at over and over again. For John Wood, his trekking trip to Nepal more than 10 years ago changed his life and transformed the lives of many disadvantaged children.

He founded Room to Read, an initiative that seeks to develop literacy skills and encourage the habit of reading among primary school children and support them through secondary school as well as equip them with the necessary life skills. In his new book, *Creating Room to Read — A Story of Hope in the Battle for Global Literacy*, Wood says the 10,000th library was recently opened in Nepal to celebrate the 12th anniversary of Room to Read.

Wood was in Singapore recently to promote his book and attend the annual fundraising gala hosted by Room to Read's Singapore chapter. Taking a break from his busy schedule, Wood told *Options* over morning coffee about the very moment he decided to embark on this ambitious project. It all started with a chance meeting with a school teacher in the very remote Himalayas who invited Wood to visit his school.

He says, "When I saw the empty library, I think the entrepreneur in me saw a gap I could fill. This was also a great opportunity for me to do something useful with my resources, with my time and talent. So, when I was trekking for the next 16 days, I kept thinking about that empty library. The moment he asked for me to come back with books, I got really excited."

At this time, Wood had a high-flying successful career with Mi-

crosoft, where he has held various positions in the company such as director of marketing for the Asia-Pacific division. His work experience helped in his quest to garner support for his project in the early days. In fact, it started almost right away. Recalling his entry in his travel journal for that day, the affable American says, "I remember writing my journal and it read very much like a pitch letter. I was going to send this out to all my friends and family to ask for help. I got really excited and I wanted to help the 450 children I met at this school."

### Giving back

His reasons are humble enough; one that struck a chord was when the Nepalese school teacher told him that many travellers like Wood had promised to return to help but never did. Also, through his trekking holiday, Wood found the Nepalese



to be warm and friendly people. "The people in Nepal are so hospitable, so I thought that was a nice way to pay them back for their hospitality."

Wood kept his promise and, a year later, he arrived with "3,000 books on six rented donkeys with my 73-year-old father as my unpaid right-hand man". Wood's face lights up as he recalls that day. "It was one of the greatest moments of my life. I was excited, but the kids were even more excited than I was. They waited for days because they heard about this man coming back with books for their library. These kids had never seen brightly coloured children's books before."

"For me, it was the beginning of my game-over moment. I kind of edged myself closer to the door at Microsoft. For me, it was a happy moment. But the entrepreneur in me said one [library] is not going to be enough. Ten is not going to be enough, 100 is not going to be enough, 1,000 is not going to be enough in a world where nearly 800 million people are still illiterate."

At the end of last year, the United Nations estimated that 775 million young people and adults around the world still could not read or write. Of that figure, about 122 million children of primary and lower secondary school age remain out of school, and millions more graduate with inadequate literacy skills. Women account for two-thirds of the world's illiterate population.

#### Education the key to the future

In 2000, Wood left his lucrative career at Microsoft and concentrated all his efforts into building and growing Room to Read. The early days proved to be the most challenging. Fortunately for him, friends and family stepped up to the plate and helped in whatever way they could.

He reveals, "I think 2000 was a really difficult time to launch a new charity because the Internet bubble burst and stock markets fell by 50%. For me, the biggest challenge was that I assumed, perhaps naively, that all these people I used to work with would be as excited as I was, and be supportive and want to help

me. The reality was those people that I worked with stopped returning my calls and emails because I could no longer be of use to them. It was a difficult moment for me because I had the zeal of a convert and I wanted everyone to get involved."

Thankfully, some of Wood's friends got involved. A few of the first fundraising events were organised by old friends from New York, Chicago, Seattle and San Francisco. They threw cocktail soirees with only a handful of people, and that was how the first few libraries were funded.

Social entrepreneurs pick causes that are varied and address a different need. For example, Blake Mycoskie, founder of Toms Shoes, chooses to provide shoes and eyewear to impoverished children through his "buy a pair and a pair will be given to a child" scheme. *Forbes* 30 under 30 social entrepreneur Scott Frank developed a solar-powered cooker that provides heat and purified water to rural parts of Western China.

Asked why he chose education, Woods shoots off a litany of reasons. "Education is the one issue that has a ripple effect that [has an impact on] every other issue. When you educate somebody, they are going to make more money. For every year a girl gets educated, she can expect to receive between 10% to 20% more higher wages per year when she eventually works."

"Educated people have healthier families. Educated women are twice as likely to vaccinate their children. Educated women have lower infant mortality and lower maternal mortality rate during childbirth. Educated people are much more peaceful and much more stable as a society."

"If you can get education right, you end up having all these other things that you get right along with it — from economic quality to healthcare to even lifespan. Educated people live much longer lives."

Of course, with any

project of this scale and duration, success stories are many; in his book, Wood lists some that will move you to tears. For example, Wood tells *Options* about a Cambodian girl who benefited from Room to Read and was in Singapore too. Like a proud father, Wood explains, "She is 21 years old and had never been outside Cambodia before; never had a passport; never been on an airplane. And yet she had the self-confidence to go into our board meeting and talk to our board members in English."

"She has been raising cows for the last seven years, and when kids were playing at lunchtime in school, she would be cutting grass to feed her cows. Just before leaving Cambodia, she sold a cow so that she could buy herself a laptop in Singapore. I call her the cow entrepreneur."

#### Building together

To find out whether a community needs a library or school, Wood, together with someone from the ministry of the country and a non-governmental organisation will visit a village. From there, they assess what is needed. "We ask: 'Is the school large enough? Are there children learning outside under a tree with a chalkboard propped against the

tree?' If the answer is yes, then that village needs a school. At that point, the negotiations start. We have a model called a 'challenge plan'. The idea behind it is that we don't build the school or the library for the local people; we build it with them."

Wood stresses that Room to Read has a unique set-up in that it includes the locals. "The decisions are made by the local people in the local context. Because, sometimes, in the charity world, you get expat Americans driving around in Land Rovers bossing the local people around saying, 'Let's do this and let's do that.'"

"I very much try to stress that strong Bangladeshis in Bangladesh, strong Vietnamese in Vietnam run the programmes. We don't send in well-meaning groups from overseas to kind of push the local people aside and say, 'We're gonna build the school for you.' It is a self-help model."

In this way, the community feels a sense of ownership and take part in everything, from digging the foundation to hauling bags of cement, to sawing and pounding nails to building a shelf and painting the library. When all that is done, the Ministry of Education then does its part by providing the teachers or librarians and pay them a salary.

Wood's aim is for the community to ultimately run the school and library. It is a way to motivate the community. But the projects are not forced on the community. He says, "If the communities are not motivated and if the parents don't want to work for it, we can't want it more than they want it. We believe we can help people only if they want to help themselves."

#### Books as a constant companion

With Room to Read in its 12th year, Wood is still surprised and humbled at the same time at its success and the number of awards it has won, not to mention an appearance on the *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Wood says, "When I accept an award, I always

say that I am accepting this award on behalf of the Room to Read family. I think that once you get too egotistical is when you get into trouble."

One of the things that keep him going is how his family shaped his childhood. In *Creating Room to Read*, Wood offers many insights into his childhood years as he pays tribute to his family. His grandmother, mother and sister, who is a librarian, were great influences during his growing-up years in a small town in Pennsylvania.

His grandmother was a voracious reader and his mother was an only child. When she complained that other children had siblings to play with and she had none, his grandmother would say, "If you have a book, you will never be lonely." Wood holds this statement close to his heart. "It was a philosophy that was implanted in me from a very young age. I still remember my grandmother would be on a chair and I would be on the couch, and we would both be reading."

"Part of the reason I do what I do is that I am passionate about education for boys as well as for girls, because I grew up in a household with three educated women who looked after me and brought me up. They made sure I studied and got good grades. I wouldn't have got to a place like Microsoft, I wouldn't have got to a good MBA school, if it weren't for them. Memories of my childhood include going to the library and checking out books and bringing books home. I would read to my dog if he would listen," he quips.

With a schedule that is jam-packed with activities, Wood still makes time to read and stays fit by running marathons. He says he gets his energy from the satisfaction he gets from Room to Read. "What keeps me going is that I have met so many children who have benefited from Room to Read. I have met parents who say this is the happiest day of their lives because their kids can now go to school. I have had grandmothers hold my hand with tears in their eyes and tell me that they can now die happy because their granddaughter is going to school, and I know that she will be okay."



Wood: Education is the one issue that has a ripple effect that [has an impact on] every other issue