



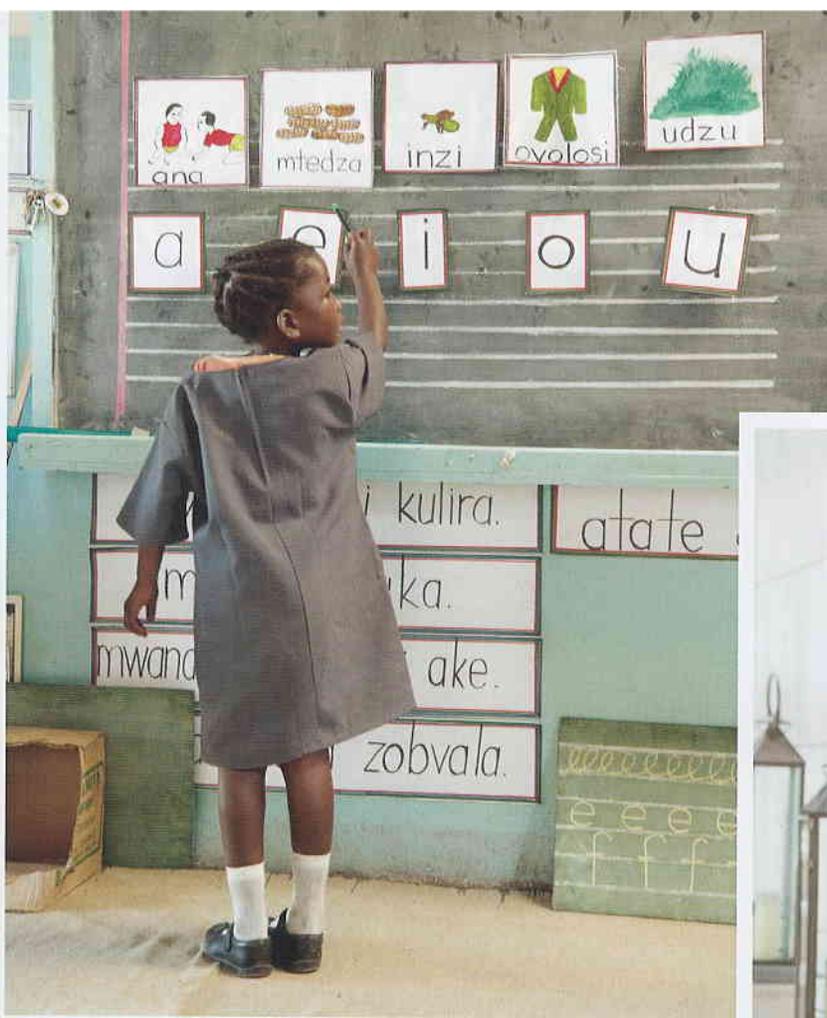
INSPIRED LEARNING More than 25,000 young women are enrolled in Room to Read's Girls' Education programme

Equality in Education

The founder of Room to Read, **JOHN WOOD**, left the corporate world and started a charity to tackle global illiteracy. He tells **ESTHER WONG** why the new direction gives his life more meaning

GLOBALLY, IT'S ESTIMATED that nearly 800 million people lack basic literacy skills—an issue that prevents them from getting quality education and therefore affects their livelihoods. John Wood, founder of the charity Room to Read, aims to tackle this problem by empowering society's youngest through the gift of education.

Established in 2000, Room to Read's global mission is two-fold: to tackle illiteracy and promote gender equality. To date, the organisation has established more than 16,000 libraries, constructed more than 1,750 schools, published 885 original children's book titles and distributed more than 13 million books in 10 countries across Asia and Africa, with more than 25,000 young women enrolled in Room to Read's Girls' Education programme.



WORDS OF WISDOM John Wood (below) founded the charity Room to Read in 2000 to tackle illiteracy and promote gender equality



“I was shocked to see that the students had no books—only a handful of old paperbacks left behind by travellers”

The numbers are inspiring, but it is the humble beginnings of the charity that makes its success that much more impressive. “As a global marketing executive responsible for significant sectors of Microsoft’s international business in 1998, I was constantly travelling and lived abroad for long stretches of time. I loved my job but was burnt out,” Wood says. “I took a three-week vacation—the first in nine years—that would change my life forever.”

Wood travelled to Nepal, trekking through the Himalayas. There, he met an education resource director who invited him for a school visit. “I was shocked to see that the students had no books—only a handful of old paperbacks left behind by travellers. And even those were kept under lock and key.” Before the end of Wood’s visit, the school’s headmaster uttered one sentence that planted the seeds for change: “Perhaps, sir, you will one day come back with books.”

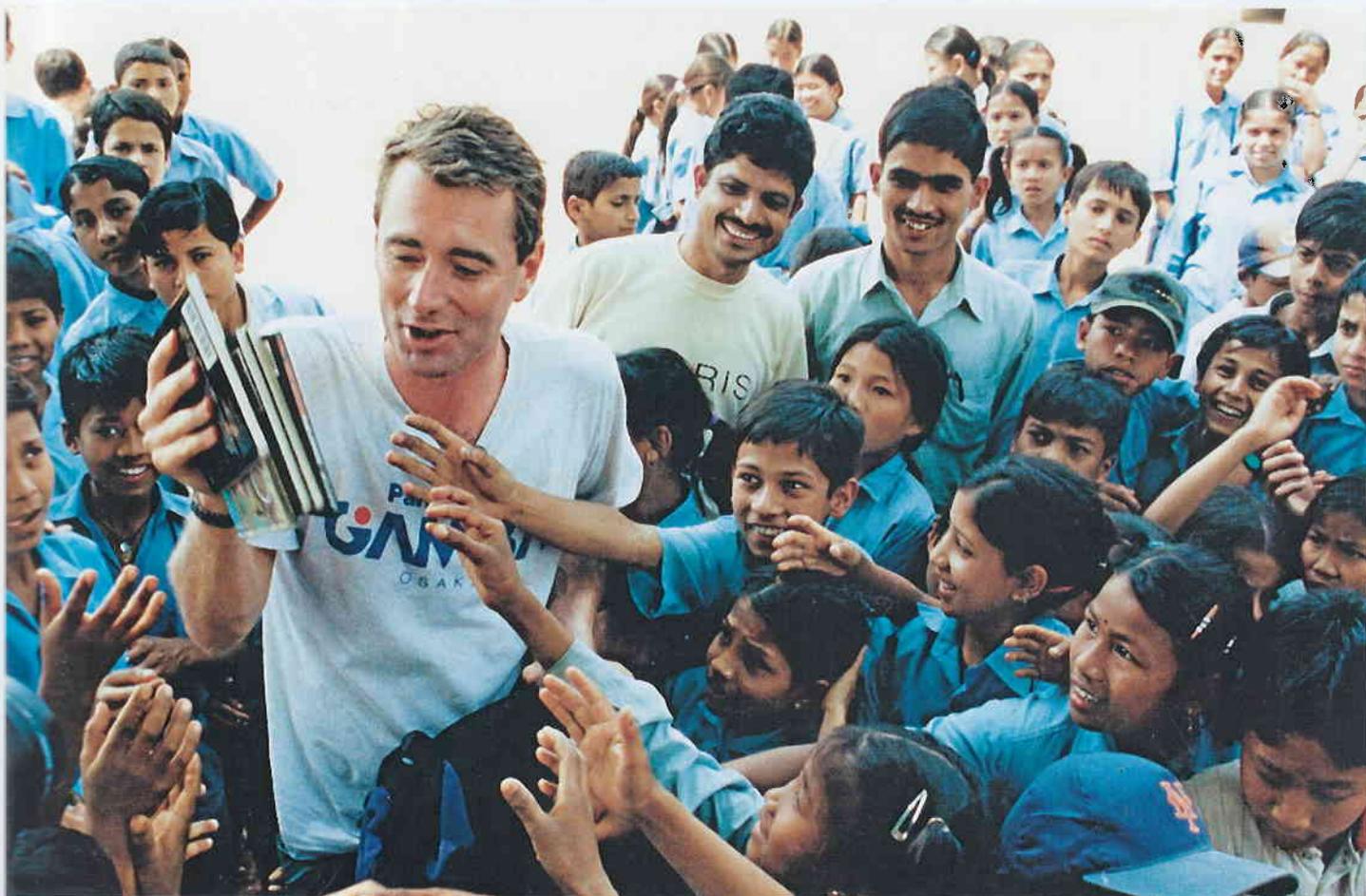
Wood recalls, “Initially, I was inspired to organise a book drive, which resulted in me and my father hauling thousands of books

up the mountains on the backs of donkeys to the same school a year later. But it soon became something much more substantial. It became a

personal mission to bring about sustainable change in these remote areas of the world.”

Though it’s been nearly 15 years since the organisation’s founding, Wood’s dedication to the cause has not faltered. “The early years of Room to Read came with many challenges, but I always remembered that headmaster in Nepal and the joy on his students’ faces when I returned to their school. I could’ve pursued my interest to address global illiteracy as a hobby—but hobbies don’t scale. I decided to jump in with both feet. And although there were a few scary moments along the way, I am lucky to have many great people join me on the journey.”

Some of those people he refers to include Room to Read’s co-founders, Erin Ganju and Dinesh Shrestha. Today, the organisation has offices around the world to oversee fundraising efforts for their programmes, including chapters in Hong Kong, San Francisco, New York, Vancouver, London, Sydney, Mumbai and Tokyo. Literacy and gender equality in education remain at the core of Room to Read, and Wood believes



READING THE FUTURE Nearly nine million children have been helped by the Room to Read charity

that “by remaining steadfast in our efforts on these fronts, we can affect many other issues, such as health and poverty.”

In September 2014, Wood relocated from New York City to Hong Kong to be closer to the Room to Read project areas. “Room to Read has an amazing base of supporters here. It has been the home of our number-one fundraising chapter (out of dozens worldwide) every year for eight years running, and our Asia Pacific board is strong and continues to grow.”

In developing and expanding the global impact of Room to Read, Wood had to fly more than 150,000 miles a year—equivalent to approximately 11 annual return-trip flights between Hong Kong and San Francisco. Now, based in Hong Kong, the city’s efficient transportation system and centralised location will help to minimise Wood’s stress and travel distances. He adds, “I also love the energy of Hong Kong, the ease of doing business and the sense here that all things are possible.”

Although he works more now than he ever did as a Microsoft executive, Room to Read gives him a greater sense of fulfilment.

“When I visit our countries of operation, I see hope. I am constantly in awe of the passion and dedication of our local teams, and rejoice alongside family and community members who see the value and opportunity that education brings to the children of their villages.”

Nearly nine million children have benefited from the services offered by Room to Read so far, and Wood explains that they hope to reach millions more in the years to come: “Room to Read will have completed its mission when no child can be told ‘You were born at the wrong place, at the wrong time, to illiterate parents—and therefore will not have access to a quality education.’ We believe that premise belongs in the scrap heap of human history.”

ON THE SAME PAGE

On March 6, Room to Read’s Hong Kong chapter will hold its 10th anniversary gala at the Four Seasons hotel. US news anchor Katie Couric will be the master of ceremonies. To find out more, visit roomtoread.org