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Activist John Wood gave up his high-flying career at Microsoft to help children in developing countries. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

Make room for reading

John Wood's Room To Read project provides poor children with books in local languages

Akshita Nanda

Fourteen years ago, John Wood gave up a US\$500,000-a-year salary at Microsoft to bring books to children in developing countries.

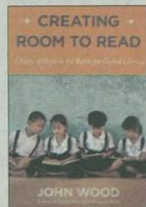
The 49-year-old American activist says he just about makes ends meet now. Still, he feels rich seeing how the not-for-profit organisation he founded, Room To Read, has grown from teaching children from a single village in Nepal, to fostering over 1,600 schools and 15,000 libraries today in countries from Asia to Africa.

"If I went back to work in tech, I'd make more money but I don't think I'd be as happy," he told Life! last week when he was in town to launch his new book, *Creating Room To Read*. Released last month by Penguin, it is a sequel to his 2006 memoir, *Leaving Microsoft To Change The World*, published by Harper Collins.

Room To Read helps communities to set up schools, libraries and education programmes to educate children, particularly girls, in countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam and Tanzania. *Creating Room To Read* tells of the students the charity has helped and the donors who made this happen - multinational corporations, executives donating free airline tickets saved from frequent-flyer miles and 13-year-old girls wanting others their age to enjoy books.

"The first book was more my story, this book is definitely more a story of 'We'. Here's what we are doing, here's how we are growing," he says.

Community participation is essential in making Room To Read schools sustainable,



he says. The charity provides some start-up capital and trains teachers but the local communities and governments must pledge to pay teacher salaries or other fees.

"If the village doesn't get involved, we can walk away but you'd be surprised by how often we don't do that," he said.

Local "chapters" help raise funds for, or awareness of, Room To Read. The Singapore chapter has about 30 core members and has raised over \$2 million annually for Room To Read since 2008. This is usually during a by-invite only gala event, most recently held on March 14.

Room To Read raised US\$41.6 million (\$52 million) in total in the 2011-2012 financial year. The leader of the Singapore chapter, Mrs Shelly Dee, 53, says: "It's a charity that people can relate to and every year, they've been to a new country."

Last November, she went on a site visit to a Room To Read school in Nepal and met students going to school in a remote village where few adults had an education. "To see the change in the young people who are being educated, you know the whole country is going to change in a generation," she says.

Nepal is where the Room To Read story started. During a 1998 backpacking trip, Mr Wood, then Microsoft's director of business development for the Greater China region, encountered a small village school where the only books for students to read were age-inappropriate novels by Umberto Eco and Danielle Steele. "They were backpacker cast-offs," he says.

He appealed to friends and family in the United States and returned the following

year with 3,000 books for children. He also helped other communities in Nepal to set up schools and libraries via a friend, Mr Dinesh Shrestha, who then headed a rural development programme there and is now a country director with Room To Read.

In 2001, their story inspired business executive Erin Ganju to quit her job with a multinational and expand Room To Read's activities into Vietnam.

Room To Read now operates much like a business, with independent evaluators hired to do spot-checks on schools and show the team where to improve and audited financial reports on its website.

"We've always believed in transparency, efficiency, being buttoned up," says Mr Wood, adding that this attitude means donors remained confident in their activities even during last year's media blitz about alleged financial wrongdoing on the part of Three Cups Of Tea author Greg Mortenson and the charity he set up to start schools in Afghanistan.

"One of the ways we're different is we admit how we are wrong," he adds.

"I was naive in the beginning, I thought donating English books would be good enough. In 2004, we asked students in Nepal what would make them use the library more often and the No. 1 answer was 'More books in Nepali'."

Room To Read now publishes books in local languages from Lao to Setswana to engage little learners. Mr Wood says the books are not mere translations into English but local works produced by local authors. Editors of these books are paid market rates.

"This year we're going to publish our 1,000th title. I always say we're the biggest publisher you've never heard of," he says with a laugh.

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Creating Room To Read is available in major bookstores and retails at \$29.95 before GST.

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By Akshita Nanda

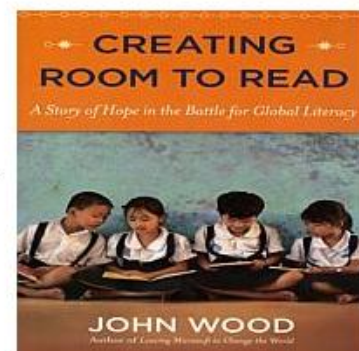
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