

# WHEN CHARITY DOESN'T BEGIN AT HOME

*He gave up his job as a Microsoft executive to help educate the world's underprivileged children. But John Wood's mercy mission is all about business, finds Madeleine Collins*

John Wood isn't happy. Curious, considering I'm here to meet the man who has apparently found the key to happiness. Even Oprah believed him – he's been on her show twice. I edge nearer.

"How many?" he is demanding of a woman dressed in a garish fitted short skirt suit, set off by an immaculately smooth platinum ponytail.

"Oh, lots," she smiles back, adoringly. "I have four children."

"How many," persists Wood.

"Sooo many. My husband and I split them between us."

She appears to be holding back.

"How many books have you read your children?" he presses on.

"Well, erm...four each." She looks a little uneasy. I feel uneasy.

"Four each, is that all? What kind of a mother are you?"

There's a pause, and then Wood breaks into a smile.

The woman laughs back. Fortunately, she turns out to be a member of the Dubai chapter of Room to Read, the non-profit organisation that Wood founded after a life-changing vacation to Nepal eight years ago, and which has created a massive network of schools and libraries throughout rural and poor communities in Asia and Africa.

There's a good reason that Wood is all about numbers these days. He is in Dubai to launch the Million Book Challenge, a concept he created with Dubai Cares, the UAE charity launched by HH Sheikh Mohammed, Ruler of Dubai, which aims to educate one million children in underdeveloped countries.

The challenge? Students throughout the emirates must read one million books during a 16 day read-a-thon, all of which

are documented by their teachers. If the challenge is met, Dubai Cares will match the million books and donate them to Room to Read, who will then print the books in the local languages and distribute them to Wood's various schools, which are located in Nepal, Cambodia, Laos, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, South Africa and Zambia.

A 50-strong crowd is assembled at Virgin Records in the Mercato Mall to witness Wood explain how he ditched his lucrative career as a global marketing director in the corporate world to create Room to Read – the subject of his book *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*.

Silence falls and Wood prepares to read an excerpt. But first he has a treat for the children in the audience. Woolly toy yaks are thrown into the crowd. The yak has special significance to Wood. It is the mode of transport on which he started his journey.

"Our story begins in Nepal. It's 1998. April – spring time in Nepal. The weather is beautiful – blue skies, snow capped peaks. I'm there as a burnt out Microsoft executive looking for solace, a holiday, looking to do a 200 mile trek on the Annapurna circuit.

"On day two of my trek, I meet a Nepali gentleman on the side of the trail, who explains he works for the education department in the Lam Chung province. 'I am a district resource officer,' he tells me, 'but I have no resources.' He invites me to come see the school that would forever change my life. I go. I wake up."

Wood says that once at the school, he was shown to the library. "Where exactly are the books?" he asked. "A teacher appeared with the only key to the rusty padlock for the cabinet where the books were locked up. 'Books are considered precious,' I was told. 'The school has so few that the teachers can't risk the children damaging them.'"

"My heart sank when the school's treasure trove of books was revealed. A Danielle Steele romance novel, the *Lonely Planet Guide to Nairobi* and a copy of James Joyce *Finnegan's Wake* – all backpacker cast offs totally inappropriate to children."

Wood was staggered. "I thought to myself, 450 students without books – how could this be happening in the world when there is an abundance of material goods?"

He entitled chapter one of his own book 'Perhaps Sir, You Will Someday Come Back with Books' after a simple request by the teacher.

"We take books for granted because we're surrounded by them, libraries, book shops," he goes on. "And it hit me. I told the headmaster I would come back. A teacher beside him looked at me skeptically. 'Many people come to our village with their backpacks on and tell us they will come back and we never see them again,' he replied. I felt as though he had thrown down the gauntlet."

Wood says that by day nine of his trek he had a 'vision' – that he would one day return to the school with so many books that he'd need a whole herd of yaks to carry them.

At the end of his 18 day trek, he put his plan into action by emailing his friends around the world. 'This is a chance for us to make a difference,' he wrote. 'There must be more we can do to help these kids.'

"Sometimes you don't realise the forces you set in motion that are going to change your life forever," he says in reflection.





"I asked for the books to be sent to my parents in Colorado as I was living overseas and I told them to expect 50-100, tops. In a month we had 3000 children's books people had sent to us – at least one yak load!"

Wood was living in Sydney at the time where he worked for Microsoft, and his father Woody, then retired, proved to be invaluable support. Once the books were ready to be shipped, Woody emailed his son imploring him to let him join him on his return trip to Nepal.

And so it was one year later that Wood and his father traveled back to the school in the village he had once trekked through, yak in tow. His plan was that every child would have four or five books and put them on shelves in the library themselves.

"The kids were lined up and they hung marigold garlands around our necks. The littlest ones had picked petals from the flowers in the forests," he recalls. "They were so excited they were just diving on the books, kids looking at pictures of the solar system, African animals, sharks, any kind of fish, a man walking on the moon – none of which they had ever seen before."

At the end of the line Wood saw the headmaster and skeptical teacher. 'We're so happy you have come back,' they told him.

It was that moment he says, that he knew he had found his own route to happiness. And he was more than prepared for the long journey that would ensue once he walked through that door.

"The phrase 'prosperity with a purpose' was borne out of that experience," says Wood. "Prosperity in itself is a fairly empty vessel; you can't get a lot of satisfaction in the long run out of having a lot of money. It's great short term, but long term it doesn't really make people happy. This made me happy."

And so Wood returned to Sydney and quit Microsoft after nearly a decade. "I had to blow up my life." He also blew up his relationship – "my future was in the third world, my girlfriend's future was in the Four Seasons."

The change he said was "hard. It was terrifying." Dinner parties became a challenge. "The first thing people ask when you meet them is 'what do you do?' When you answer, 'I deliver books in Nepal on the back of yaks,' you tend to get left alone with the empty cocktail platter pretty quickly."

There were numerous nay-sayers. "I had people who didn't even know me offering me advice telling me it was a crazy idea," he says. But to Wood, it was simple.

"There are 200 million kids in the developing world who don't go to school. And 800 million people in the developing world who lack basic literacy. Two thirds of those people are girls and women so you've got to build schools and libraries and fund scholarships for girls."

"There are three things to me that sound simple. They're low tech and low cost, and early intervention (what Dubai Cares

is doing) pays long term dividends. So I thought, why can't we do this?"

His business background proved invaluable. Wood says he based his business plan for Room to Read on three vital lessons he learnt from his corporate experience.

"Microsoft always thought big, much like the UAE, but the charity sector doesn't have that same thinking. There's this desire to stay really small and grass roots, but when you look at the scale of the problems facing the world you need to think big, not just in the business sector."

The second lesson: Hire the right people. "At Microsoft, we hired great people, gave them a goal and got out of their way. We didn't micro-manage them. If you have good people you don't need to micro-manage them. Seventy five percent of Room to Read's employees are local nationals. We hire local people; we don't send American overseas to boss people around."

"Thirdly, in business your sales and marketing department have to make their numbers. If they don't they get fired, because the company fails." Wood feels the same way and leads by example by spending 80 percent of the time out on the road to raise capital. "Some charities treat fundraising like it's a dirty word. Not us. Our receptionist sells the charity when they come in the office."

A foolproof plan maybe, but the timing was not good. It was 2000 and the technology and stock markets were melting down – a terrible time to launch a charity that





was 100 percent dependent on donations, says Wood. He was inspired by his favourite quote to get him through the low times: 'A statue has never been erected in honor of a critic' was posted across the top of his computer screen.

"I got so tired of critics saying this isn't going to work," he recalls. "That quote has stayed with me forever – to remember that it doesn't matter what other people think of your dream, it matters what you think."

Wood admits he started out as a cheap-skate. "I was fearful of overhead expenses because I wanted to put everything into the programs. I refused to hire anyone for the first year and a half. What a mistake. I was the fundraiser, the guy who walked the deposits to the bank, the stamp lick, the receptionist, and the janitor who took out the trash after a 14 hour day."

"There was pressure to be everywhere at once and the constant travel only exacerbated the feeling that my life was spinning out of control."

But Wood kept at it; presented slide shows, spoke to friends of friends, anything to raise funds. It was the Draper Richards Foundation – which backed Hotmail and Tumbleweed, among others – who proved to be his saving grace, by providing the significant cash injection he needed.

The Draper money was followed by investment by Don Valentine of Sequoia Capital, who backed Yahoo, Google and Apple.

Donations were varied and all were as important as each other. Wood's first school

was personally funded by his parents.

But as always, it's all about numbers. By the end of this year, Room to Read will have over 7000 libraries worldwide, containing five million books – half of which will be printed in local languages.

Wood's goodwill has also rubbed off on those who believe in him. These days he flies on the frequent flier points of a Goldman Sachs executive who offered him the use of his three million amassed miles. And Ketchum, the worldwide PR company of Room To Read, works pro-bono.

But something had to go. Relationships fell victim, one after the other. "One woman I was dating finally told me, 'Room to Read is your wife, your mistress, your child, your family dog and also your career,'" says Wood.

"But I had found the one thing I always wanted – a career with meaning, about which I feel passion. That's a rare luxury in this world and I'm lucky to have it. 'I will not be working fewer hours, I will not be traveling less,' I told her. 'This is my passion and this is what I want to do.' Not a great speech for a bachelor in San Francisco!"

But for all of the sacrifices there have been many more achievements. "From day one I predicted that Room to Read would open 20,000 libraries and schools and serve 10 million kids. Everyone told me I was crazy, and here we are today with 7,700, serving two million kids, and that's just the tip of the iceberg given our growth rate. It's been an incredible ride."

Thirty five cities around the world now have fundraising chapters – where people donate their time to help raise money – the latest of which is Dubai.

They've raised \$18 million of commitments as volunteers so far and the goal is to establish fundraising chapters in every major city of the world.

So has Wood met his former boss, who himself left Microsoft earlier this year to devote his time to his own charitable foundation? "I've met his wife Melinda," he smiles, "she was my hiring manager."

Wood says The Gates Foundation donates a small amount of funding to Room to Read, mainly because it doesn't fall into their remit as they focus on health and vaccines.

"The work that they are doing is incredible," says Wood. "I think if you can give every kid in the poorest parts of world three things – vaccines, clean water and education – they're set for life."

"We don't have 47 billion dollars like the Gates Foundation does, we have to go out every day and fundraise for it, do events and charity drives and partner with people like Dubai Cares."

"It's fun though and if you're not passionate, you're not going to do it. Nothing makes people more passionate than being there when a new school opens, or being there the day a little girl gets her first backpack and her bicycle and starts her scholarship."

"That's the best kind of fundraising – taking people to see what we have all achieved together."

