

the importance of reading

he loves books and he believes
all children should be able to read
and explore the marvels of
the world of written words

text stefanie lily austen images courtesy of cher library

“My earliest memory is of my mother reading to me. She was reading a book that showed a picture of a man on a camel in Egypt. I told her that one day, I too would visit the Egyptian pyramids and ride a camel, and I did.”

James J Owens – fulltime faculty member at the Center of Management Communication at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, author of the soon to be completed and highly anticipated book, “The World is Just a Book Away”, jovial interpersonal authority, expert in professional management communication, and founder and CEO of non-profit organisation The World is Just a Book Away felt that the written word was his best friend as a child and that it allowed him to travel through the ages and around the world. “I think that the many stories of faraway places read to me by my mother helped spark off my love for language and travel”, he says.

helping hands



“The American do-gooder finds it simply impossible to imagine a life without books”-

His statement, “Anything is possible through books and story!” reveals a deep-rooted love for the gazillion paperbacks that have coloured the brainwaves of this remarkable man. The American do-gooder finds it simply impossible to imagine a life without books, as they have played such an enormous role in his life and development. He recognises books and education as equalisers. He says, “Once people can read, they can learn almost anything and travel to all corners of the earth through all periods of time; even visit outer space and the world of fantasy.”

In an effort to eliminate global illiteracy, and to help create “a world in which all children have access to books, quality education, and hope for the future”, James Owens, with his The World is Just a Book Away, has built 22 libraries and a first mobile library to provide thousands of children with proper reading material. More than thirty people who are involved with the organisation have worked determinedly in order to bring more than twenty thousand books to over ten thousand children in Sidoarjo, East Java, and Bali.

“I would love to see all the children of the world have access to books so that they can learn, explore their talents and create possibilities for themselves and their communities,” he says, hinting that this astonishing achievement might just turn out to be the meagre beginnings of a long and worldwide success story.

James Owens clarifies, “We chose to launch our first projects in Indonesia after a very careful thought process and because we found a strong local partner in my friend Andru Subowo, nurtured a solid partnership with the InterContinental Bali – which resulted in our participating in their school project in Jimbaran through The World is Just a Book Away Cher Library – and enjoyed support from many other Indonesian friends. Strategically, we are committed to making a deep, lasting impact, instead of trying to be in many places at once. Therefore, although we will eventually expand into other countries, our commitment to Indonesia is long-term.”

When asked what his all-time favourite read is, James Owens answers that although many books have touched his soul, he was deeply moved when he read “The Diary of Anne Frank” at the age of 14. He explains that the true story of injustice on one side and unbelievable courage on the other have inspired him enormously. It saddens many, including James Owens who appreciated the true hero she was, that Mrs. Miep Gies – initially known for hiding the Frank family during World War II to protect them from the merciless tyranny of German soldiers, and for salvaging Anne Frank’s diary, which grew to be one of the most widely read books of all time – has very recently died at the age of 100. A gesture of acknowledgment doesn’t come close to what she deserves to be honoured with. A humble and grateful salute to this extraordinary lady from all of us, admirers of heroism. Rest in peace.

“Recently, I found a ‘lifeline’ that I wrote when I was 17”, James concludes. “I was surprised to read that, even then, I wanted to help children by building schools and libraries. Since my early twenties, I have travelled to more than fifty countries and visited villages without libraries, without schools, without books, and I often thought how wonderful it would be to have the opportunity to help those people. The World is Just a Book Away afforded me that opportunity.” •

To learn more about how to help build libraries for children, visit www.justabookaway.org.

