

UP FRONT

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RINGO H.W. CHIU/LABJ

Paged: USC professor James J. Owens, founder of The World Is Just a Book Away.

Booked for Future Travel

USC professor creates non-profit to establish libraries across globe.

James J. Owens wants to sow the seeds that will grow into the next generation of international business leaders. So he's launched a non-profit organization with the goal of spreading knowledge across the world through libraries.

Owens, an assistant professor in management communications at USC's Marshall School of Business, recently returned from Indonesia, where his organization, The World Is Just a Book Away, has spent the past eight months getting the project off the ground. Book Away has completed 10 libraries there so far since launching in October.

Before the end of the year, Owens, 44, said he and his associates expect to complete another 10 facilities as well as a mobile library serving 28 more schools in that country.

"There's a great deal of need," Owens said. "Most of the children over there have never even seen books with pictures."

And in the years following, Owens said, they expect to spend as much as \$300,000 annually building libraries worldwide.

The project grew out of an anthology he's compiling, which will feature essays by successful people on how they were inspired by reading. He hopes to fund the libraries with royalties from the book sales.

In the meantime, he's put together a 12-member board that's already raised \$25,000 through donations and fundraisers, and expects to add \$50,000 to \$65,000 by the end of the year.

"The average cost of a library in Indonesia is \$2,500 including books," Owens said.

The libraries that Book Away built are in a region that had been hit by mudslides. So the organization had to dig out the sites first, then do construction on the ruins of wrecked school grounds.

"We had to refurbish the rooms, raise the floors, put in windows and supply the books," he said.

After finishing in Indonesia, Owens said, the organization intends to focus on India, followed by other developing countries.

"Books expand our horizons allowing us to dream," the business professor said. "Just because people are poor doesn't mean they're unintelligent or uncreative; given the opportunity, they can come up with amazing business ideas. We may have a future Andrew Carnegie in Indonesia."

— David Haldane