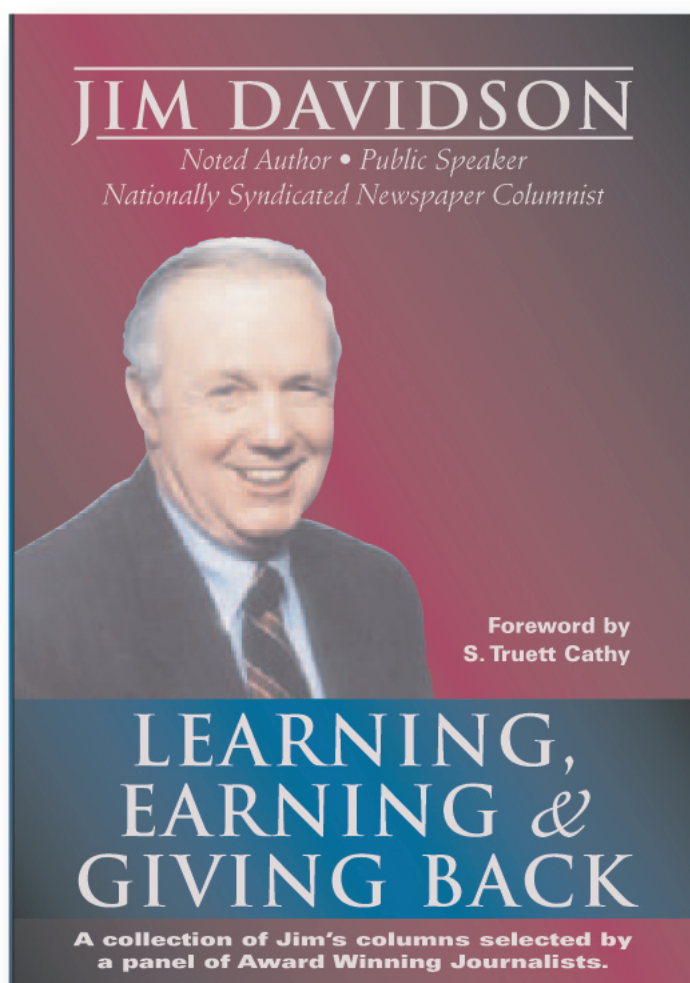


FEATURES

A NEW SYMBOL FOR LITERACY IN AMERICA



By C. Dennis Schick,
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How can buying a good book improve your community? This is an idea that is working right now in Conway, Arkansas and it can work equally well in your community.

The book is "Learning, Earning & Giving Back" written by nationally-syndicated columnist Jim Davidson. This book, comprised of 49 of Davidson's best columns from the past six years, was published specifically to improve literacy in our country. He is devoting ALL of the net income from sales of the book to literacy efforts.

While ILLITERACY is a national problem it must be solved at the local level and it must be solved by all Americans, especially parents. Why parents? In 1955, 81% of parents read to their children; in 2000, only 21 percent of parents or adults in the same household read to or with their children. It is even worse today.

In Conway, Davidson and a group of his fellow citizens are doing something about this problem and they are attacking it where the need is the greatest -- with economically-disadvantaged children. One day after learning that 61% of low income

families own no books, he came up with the idea of building quality bookcases, adding a starter set of "gently used" children's books to each one, fastening a brass nameplate to personalize them for self-esteem, and then donating them to many of these youngsters in his community.

He also understood that giving needy children a bookcase and books was not enough. In addition children also need adults to interact with and read to them on a regular basis. This is especially true for those who live in single parent homes.

One of the first steps in carrying out this idea was to enlist Conway Police Chief Randall Aragon as the Co-Chairman for the project. They selected key leaders in the community and asked them to help. In a short time the mayor, the newspaper publisher, the chamber of commerce director, a college librarian, an architect, a woodworking craftsman, a former state senator, a minister, the housing authority director, the director of the community action program and a number of other prominent citizens --15 total, and all enthusiastic -- were on the committee.

After an organizational meeting, the committee



Pictured at the Log Cabin Democrat are some of the 6,000 volumes of books donated by the citizens of Conway, Arkansas.



Phylliss Fry and her committee of volunteers are sorting 'gently used' children's books and determining reading levels, that will create a starter-set to go in each bookcase.

conducted a book drive for "gently used" children's books. This drive was promoted by the local newspaper, The Log Cabin Democrat and the local cable television station, Channel 81. Merchants throughout the city volunteered to be drop-off points. In only a few weeks the number of donated books reached 6,000 volumes. While this



Volunteer woodworking craftsmen are seen constructing quality oak bookcases in a unique assembly line

was taking place, Mickey Cox and a group of volunteer woodworking craftsmen were building the bookcases. Mickey came up with an ingenious idea of using oak plywood and facing it with solid oak to reduce the costs. He also came up with the idea of building 'jigs' to produce the bookcases with an assembly-line concept.

All this was made much easier because Reverend Larry Pillow, a member of the committee, volunteered the use of his

church's fellowship hall as a place to construct the bookcases. It was also used as a place to store the books as they came in, and for Phylliss Fry and a committee of women to sort and classify the books to be placed in the bookcases.

The first Awards Ceremony was held on a Sunday afternoon, with committee members, children, parents and representatives of the media attending. The ceremony

ended with refreshments, as bookcases were loaded into cars and trucks for delivery. The CBS and NBC television stations from Little Rock covered the event as well as the local newspaper, which gave a front page story the following day. Local Channel 81 filmed the ceremony and aired it twice.

The plan is to make this an annual event, with at least 50 more bookcases -- personalized with each child's name, and with a starter set of children's books -- to more deserving children in the community.

The project is called "A Bookcase for Every Child." Author Jim Davidson is a very strong believer in free-enterprise and does



Craftsman Mickey Cox attaches a personalized nameplate to a bookcase before it is presented to a deserving



Melissa Dunbar, television reporter for KTHV, CBS Television in Little Rock, interviews Jim Davidson prior to the Awards Ceremony.

not WANT to use any tax or government grant money to solve the problem of illiteracy. As he points out, "Our nation is in deep financial trouble and we don't want to add to the national debt." The only cost for the whole project is just the cost of the wood to build the bookcases. Everything else is done and donated by volunteers. At \$30 each, it does not take much money to build the bookcases. They are solid, of high quality and would sell for over \$100 each if sold at retail.

Jim believes that his book, "Learning, Earning & Giving Back" can and should become "A New Symbol for Literacy in America" SINCE this is why the book was published in the first place. "It's a very simple concept," says Davidson. "Buy a good book and improve your community." When enough people in each community purchase enough books -- at \$15.95 plus postage -- to buy the wood for the bookcases, they actually "empower" an army of volunteers to go to work building

bookcases, collecting books and reading to children to help them succeed and to develop literacy skills. People in each area have 'ownership' in improving their own communities.

But the most

important factor of all is the awareness this creates throughout each community for every literate person to help stamp out illiteracy. The most successful communities across the nation have, among other

things, strong schools and parent involvement in the development of their children. A good education is the key to an individual's and a nation's success. People cannot get a good education, nor a good job, if they cannot read. An educated



Parents and children are excited to pick out their own personalized bookcase to take home and begin a lifetime journey of reading.

workforce in a community leads to new industry, more and better jobs, and increased growth and economic development.

The "Bookcase for Every Child" project that started in Conway, Arkansas can spread to every community in America. They all have leaders -- people who support education and who want to have a better life for themselves, their children and their grandchildren. In the future, each time you hear the title of Davidson's book, "Learning, Earning & Giving Back," think literacy...and what you can do to help.

To find out more about this project, Davidson's book, and to get a free kit to implement it in your community, call 1-800-242-2618, e-mail him at jimdavidson@conwaycorp.net, or visit his website at: jimdavidsoncolumn.com Think about it: If you don't do it, who will?

C. Dennis Schick, now retired, was Executive Director for the Arkansas

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