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Changing the future, one bookcase at a time

By Rebecca Brockman

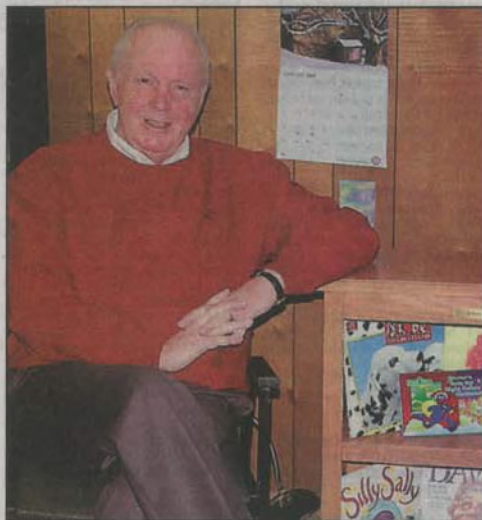
More jail beds, increased levels of police enforcement or stricter curfews are some of the solutions recommended for areas where crime is high and growing.

Jim Davidson has a more simple, direct approach — reading. He believes that a community that works together to promote literacy could remove the dark film that shrouds our nation. In 2005, Davidson, a well-known syndicated columnist, founded 'A Bookcase for Every Child' in Conway, Ark.

Annually, the project delivers 50 handcrafted oak bookcases to children in low-income families during an awards ceremony. Each bookcase comes with a set of starter books and personalized nameplate with the recipients name proudly displayed. Davidson and a committee, which he says is key to the operation, have created a model for anyone to follow.

A Bookcase for Every Child project is designed to be used all over the country, possibly even overseas. The project is copywritten, but only because Davidson wants people to do it as he intended.

Unique in so many ways, Davidson explains that the project is done solely on a volunteer basis and that the



Jim Davidson, syndicated columnist and founder of A Bookcase for Every Child project in Conway believes in community and the lasting effects of literacy. Davidson's project gives hand-crafted bookcases, with a few starter books, to well-deserving children in Faulkner County. (Rebecca Brockman)

project doesn't utilize any tax money or grants of any kind.

"A lot of people can get money from a variety of sources and build bookcases and give them to children. But they will not create the awareness and get the community involved like [we have]," Davidson explained.

He has involved the community on many levels; for example, the committee represents Head Start, local government and police forces, retired educators, architects, librarians, the church and craftsmen.

"Whatever we do, we want to involve as many people as we

can," explains Davidson. Community involvement is at the core of the whole project. After the committee was formed over three years ago, they looked to the people of Conway to help with a book drive. "Within three months of doing the book drive, we collected 6,000 books," Davidson said with a big smile.

The next item of business was actually building the bookcases to give to the children. Again, a pastor from the community stepped forward and donated his fellowship hall for bookcase assembly. The craftsmen have designed jigs for the bookcases, so they can make 10-12 a day. Davidson explained it doesn't take long to make 50.

"We only do 50 at a time, because it's all volunteer. If you try and work a volunteer for three or four months, you would lose them. But as long as it's still fun, and they have a good time, you can do 50," Davidson said.

Davidson also came up with a bookcase literacy banquet idea, which he describes as the "missing link" compared to other similar projects. The banquet is one of his team's main fundraising events. At a reasonable price of \$15.95 per ticket, the banquet attendee is treated to a good meal, local talent and a copy of Davidson's

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book, "Learning, Earning and Giving Back."

The banquet meal is served family style, which Davidson explains creates a family environment and creates community. "The banquet is so much more, it brings the community together, people love to do something where they feel good about [being] part of it.

"In one night, we raised enough money to build 50 more bookcases and enough for two more startup projects," Davidson said enthusiastically. But he explains that they don't need money, "we need people." He stresses the importance of not depending on one or two people funding the whole project, which would defeat the purpose of the program.

The only cost involved in the project is materials for the bookcases — everything else is donated.

In addition to the literacy banquet, Davidson also donates 100 percent of the profits from his book sales to the project.

Building the bookcases is

only a portion of their mission; Davidson and his committee have a much larger vision. "We want to get strong in terms of credibility and respect. We want parents to spend more time reading with their child and putting wholesome [sources of entertainment] in front of them," explains Davidson. "We want our society to grow up."

He explains that 61 percent of kids in low-income homes do not have any books. "Children raised in disadvantaged homes hear 2,900 words before they go to school, but a child in a reading-rich environment hears double that amount," states Davidson. According to the experienced columnist, the results are simple, "No vocabulary, no foundation, they are a walking dropout."

Literacy can change that downward spiral; it can alter a child's future. A Bookcase for Every Child's mission is straightforward and available for any community.

The group's Web site

advises that the leader of the bookcase project should be retired or semi-retired, but most of your committee members can still be actively working, they

should understand that serving on a committee will not take much of their time.

"The committee needs to be made up of people who have specific expertise, skills and positions," Davidson stressed. "People who are literate are the only ones who can help those that are illiterate. Education is

the key."

If you are interested in starting A Bookcase for Every Child in your area or volunteering, visit their Web site, bookcaseforeverychild.com. To contact Jim Davidson, visit www.jimdavidsoncolumn.com. ♦