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Christine Tatum

Ex-Microsoft executive chips away at illiteracy

Published September 9, 2002

John Wood doesn't regret trading in a six-figure salary at **Microsoft Corp.** for yak rides in the Himalayas.

After collecting his business degree from **Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management**, he headed to the software behemoth, where he rose through the ranks to become its director of business development in China. A posh home in San Francisco, a driver and a maid quickly followed suit.

"At the end of the day, I would think of all of those kids I watched in other countries growing up illiterate," he said. "Doing something about that became more important than my own stupid, corporate, white-collar world."

So, Wood, 38, resigned and founded **Room to Read**, a nonprofit organization that delivers education to children in developing countries. Since its launch two years ago, the group has worked primarily in Nepal and Vietnam to build 25 schools and 200 libraries, deliver more than 100,000 books and fund more than 100 scholarships.

The organization helps villages that take the initiative to request its services and invest some of their own money in the work. Given that illiteracy rates sometimes exceed 80 percent of a population, not everyone is given computers and software, he said.

"One of the worst things you can do is to give people technology before they're ready for it," Wood said. "But when they are, it's amazing to connect them to the entire world even when they don't have roads that are suitable for travel."

Wood said he dwells "not on the purity of our mission,

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but on delivering results." Smart use of technology, he said, encourages donors to continue giving. Room to Read volunteers, many of whom also left high-paying jobs in technology, typically wield digital cameras, laptop computers and wireless devices so that only a few hours after a ribbon-cutting, they can send the images and a note of thanks to donors.

"Within a month, we're able to say to someone, 'See what your money accomplished?'" Wood said.

The organization plans to expand into Cambodia, and Wood plans to explain the projects that lie ahead at a fundraiser set for 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday at the East Bank Club, 550 N. Kingsbury Dr. Tickets are \$35 at the door.

More online: For photos of Room to Read's work abroad, visit chicagotribune.com/technology.

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