



Jim Davidson: A Man Determined to Make a Difference

By Nancy Mitchell

The famous Anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." There is a man who lives in Conway, Arkansas who has a vision to change the lives, futures and fortunes of millions of Americans in the coming months and years. His name is Jim Davidson. Jim is a nationally syndicated newspaper columnist who founded a unique all-volunteer, Giving Back literacy project in 2005 called "Bookcase for Every Child" and this project has already made a difference in hundreds of lives but according to him, has only scratched the surface.

When it comes to public and community service, Jim Davidson is hardly a Johnny-come-lately. Going back to the late 1960's he served as Chairman of the Diamond Club, membership sales unit of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce. He would later serve two terms on the Pulaski County Quorum Court and also serve as Chairman of the Speakers Bureau of the Pulaski County United Way. After working with Arkansas schools, as a businessman consultant, he was given a lifetime membership in the DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of Arkansas) and GCE (General Cooperative Education Clubs of Arkansas).

Later after moving to Conway he was awarded the Good Neighbor Award by the Conway Chamber of Commerce and also



the Distinguished Service Award by the Conway Public Schools. Along the way he also found time in 1980 to begin a 5-minute, commercially sponsored, daily radio program titled, "How to Plan Your Life" that would be carried by over 300 stations coast to coast. In 1995 he began a weekly newspaper column in his hometown newspaper, the Log Cabin Democrat that he self-syndicated to over 375 newspapers in 35 states, making it one of the most successful self-syndicated columns in the history of American journalism.

It is uncanny sometimes the way things

happen that can change the course of our lives. This happened to Jim back in the late 1990's when a loyal reader in Bluefield, West Virginia gave him a statistic that he had never thought about or heard before. This reader, the late Eva Easley, told him that she had learned that 61% of low-income families in America had no books in the home for their pre-school children to read. This planted a seed in his fertile mind that would, over time, grow to a large plant as he realized that people who never learned to read could not achieve success in today's society. They would also never have an opportunity to read his column.



This allowed the project to help identify children who lived in homes that were in need of the books and bookcases.

Since the project was about giving back, the committee determined that the only cost would be purchasing the material and supplies to build the bookcases. At the meeting several members donated money to help get the project started. Jim Davidson was selected to be the chairman and has since been the driving force behind the project. Over the next three years he called on several banks and other organizations for financial support and, at the suggestion of a friend, sold copies of one of his books and gave all the proceeds to the project for this purpose.

And then, Jim says the Lord gave him the best idea he ever received to pay for the building materials and make the project sustainable, and that was to have an Annual Bookcase Literacy Banquet. This would help supply the needed funds to keep the project moving forward. It was determined that cost of each ticket would be \$15.95 which was the same as the cost of the book he had been selling to raise the funds. For this, each person who attended would receive a wonderful meal, enjoy local entertainment and be given a copy of Jim's book, 'Learning, Earning & Giving Back.' However, there were exceptions to local entertainment. In 2016 Craig O'Neill from Channel 11 Television was the speaker, and in 2017 Shoji Tabuchi from

The next event that served to chart his course was a phone call from Randall Aragon who, at the time, was Chief of Police in Lumberton, North Carolina. Randall had applied for the same job in Conway. His wife had been reading Jim's column online and she told him, "You need to get to know this man." Randall called to invite Jim to dinner the evening before he was to interview with the search committee the next morning.

Well, as they say, the rest is history as he got the job and became the new Conway Chief of Police. A friendship that started a few weeks before would grow in the coming days, including accepting Jim's offer to join the Conway Noon Lions Club. As time passed, Jim learned that Randall was an avid reader and he shared the fact that 61% of low-income families had no books in the home for their children to read. If these families had no books, it was sure they had no place to keep them.

Soon the idea came that these children from low-income families would benefit from a starter set of books and a bookcase as well. A prototype bookcase was built and Jim and Randall had lunch with the mayor who truly understood this life changing vision. Jim then began the task of recruiting members for a Conway Bookcase Project Committee. Since Jim had been in Conway much longer, he knew many key people who were excited and willing to serve on the committee.

The first committee meeting was held on June 9, 2005 at the City Hall in Conway and plans were made to begin the project. There were a number of key issues decided that would not only chart the course of the project but give it real sustainability to insure long term success. First, they wanted the project to be "all-volunteer" with committee members giving back with no one earning as much as a penny for their good work. Almost by fate, the director of the Head Start Program was a member of the committee, and parents must be low-income for a child to be in Head Start.



Branson, Missouri provided the entertainment. The Governor of Arkansas has been invited to speak at this year's banquet.

As the years passed, they kept doing what they were doing and with great results. At the suggestion of Randall Aragon, a committee member, they started an Annual Awards Ceremony which was held at the Faulkner County Library. The program featured local dignitaries and a well-known keynote speaker, to honor the parents and children and to present the bookcases and books. To date, over the past 14 years, they have presented 700 bookcases and books locally. The project has now been instituted in five other states, with over 2,000 of these bookcases being built across the nation.

Needless to say, in the intervening years, Jim and members of the committee have learned a lot about the need to improve literacy in our nation. They already understood that the child who grows up in America without learning to read does not have a prayer when it comes to achieving success. But here is what else they have learned: According to a 2017 study by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, 32 million adults in America can't read, in large measure because they had no books in the home during their formative years.

Additionally, the Department of Justice states, "The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence and crime is welded to reading failure. The stats back up this claim: 85% of all juveniles who interface with the juvenile court system are functionally illiterate and over 70% of inmates in America's prisons cannot read above fourth grade level (according to BeginToRead.com). The inability to read is silently killing America, ruining lives, costing billions of dollars and pulling down the ability of the United States to compete with the rest of the world.

However, there is some very positive news to report. In the very first year after presenting the bookcases and books, the Head Strat people reported that there was a 76% increase in parents checking out books from their "lending libraries" to read to their children. They have also heard directly from some of the children who came back to the awards ceremonies to tell what the bookcases and books had personally meant to them and how well they did in school.

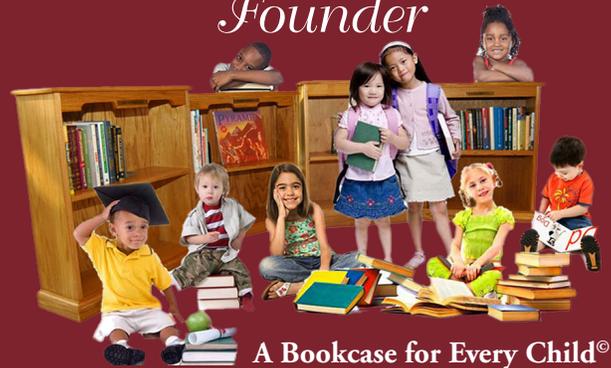
The verdict is in and the evidence has mounted that every community in America would do well to have their own "Bookcase for Every Child" project to help children in low-income families. These are the children most likely to drop out of school, get involved in drugs and a life of crime. Jim says that most Americans know that we have a literacy problem but he is convinced they have no idea how serious the problem really is and what it is costing our nation in lost productivity and wasted human potential.

As he thought about this, he realized that because of age, his days were numbered and when he was gone, the details of how to organize and manage a bookcase project would be gone as well. So he set about the task of writing a book that would give a chronology of the project and all the various details necessary to

MY HEARTFELT PASSION

Saving Our Nation One Child at a Time

Jim Davidson
Founder



A Bookcase for Every Child®

Noted Author • Public Speaker • Newspaper Columnist

duplicate the copyrighted project that began in 2005 in Conway, Arkansas. The book is titled, "My Heartfelt Passion: Saving Our Nation One Child at a Time" and is available from www.amazon.com and www.BarnesandNoble.com Jim earns no profit from the sale of his book. He just wants the Lord to say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Jim's vision is for 10-15 leaders in every community in America to buy the book, read it, and then start a project in their own community. He believes that Margaret Mead was right but desires no credit for his appeal for every literate American citizen to get involved. It is one thing to say, "I don't have time" but when we all stop to realize we are talking about the futures of our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and when this hits us squarely in the face, we understand that we must make the time. Will you be one of those leaders?

Mrs. Nancy Mitchell is a retired school teacher and a member of the Conway Bookcase Project Committee.