Room to Read on Oprah tomorrow

1 Apr 2007 by JR

Please forgive me that this is not strictly speaking connected with wine or food but I thought you might be interested in the tale below by an amazing guy Nick and I met at an FT wine dinner in aid of his charity Room to Read in Hong Kong in January 2006 where we, and many others, could not have been more impressed by him. John Wood is the ex Microsoft executive who gave it all up to set up schools and libraries all over Asia, realizing that lack of education and especially literacy is a huge problem for millions of bright young people, especially women, in countries such as Nepal and Vietnam.

Since then he has brought out a very moving autobiographical book called Leaving Microsoft to Change the World *and made incredible progress. But the thing I thought might interest you particularly is this account he has just sent of being taped in Chicago last week for tomorrow's Oprah Winfrey show. Fascinating insider stuff.*

See the end of John's story below for what he has managed to achieve so far. You can find out more anyway at www.roomtoread.org

Greetings from 35,000 feet over Iowa. Please excuse the impersonal mail, but a lot of friends around the world asked me to send out an update after the Oprah taping that took place in Chicago yesterday. Thanks to everyone who sent "good luck" messages, as my nervousness was at least somewhat dissipated by all of the excitement and support.

Wow, the show could not have gone better, and I could not be more excited for the show to air. It portrayed Room to Read in an extremely favorable light, and our team is now getting ready for what promises to be a deluge of new supporters.

The theme of the show was The *Power* of One – how one person, with one idea, can follow their dream to make the world a better place. I was a little bit uncomfortable with this, as Room to Read is an amazing team, and we've been trying to stress that the organization "is not about John". But, when Oprah calls, you take the call, so……

My preparation actually started a few weeks ago, with some incredible pro bono coaching from Margaret Gifford, a PR professional at Ogilvy who has been working with Room to Read. Together we did several hours of on-camera interviews, with Margaret playing Oprah, and me playing Mr. Deer in the Headlights. We would review film, critique my (many) flaws, and then do it all again. Did you know that when people talk and I am impatient for them to finish, I wiggle my fingers? Or should I say that I used to? It was a very informative exercise, and I learned a lot, and by the end felt very comfortable and chatty.

The next step of preparation was….drum roll please…..shopping! After the debacle of my "bad khaki" experience on the Travis Smiley show on PBS, certain unnamed members of my team pulled an intervention. Within hours my friend Kim had thrown me in her car and whisked me off to some of San Francisco's finest shops with the chilling admonition of "This is not going to be inexpensive". First stop, as if to prove her point, was Saks. Kim, a woman of refined taste whose husband Ian always looks like he stepped straight from the pages of GQ, made a dash straight across the store to a blazer that she said would "make your eyes pop". The price tag did indeed do this. J Let's just say that some Italian dude named Zegna is a bit richer now than he was a few weeks ago. Oh yeah, and we convinced the sales clerk to donate her commission to the Room to Grow girl's scholarship program.

OK, then it was off to Chicago. The hardest part of the entire process was allocating our meager supply of tickets. Most guests get only four, but the wonderful producers love Room to Read, and gave us eight. Still, it's kind of a mixed blessing, like that time in college when you brag to all your friends that you have two front row seats to REM, and then you have to alienate everyone you don't invite. The Chicago Room to Read chapter hosted a great dinner for 16 of us – Room to Read staff, volunteers, two of our Board members, and Chicago-based donors. We highly recommend Vermillion, 10 West Hubbard, for the best "Latin India fusion" you've ever had. The spirit and the energy at the table were amazing, and in my toast I apologized for what was going to be over-use of the pronoun "I" during the next day's taping The victory of being on the Oprah Winfrey Show is, indeed, a team victory. I just get to be the lucky guy on stage.

The day of show wake up call came at 6:30. Ugh! Thank God I was on London time. In addition to the eight tickets, I was allowed to bring one "Green Room Buddy" who would hang with me backstage as they did makeup, hair, and the pre-interview briefing. I was advised to bring someone who could "make you calm", and since there is nobody on this universe who has ever been able to do that, I invited Kim, mostly as punishment for the expensive shopping trip. The town car was waiting downstairs, we stopped for humongo SBUX lattes, and were in the green room by 7:15, with about two hours to relax before the big moment.

The producers of the show could not have been nicer, more professional, or more calming. The quality of the team Oprah has put together was stunning to us. We have now worked with six of their producers, and several of them even donated to Room to Read. Mimi, an old friend of Room to Read and a veteran of the Trek for Literacy 2002 to Vietnam and Cambodia is the make-up artist for the show, so in reality the green room was full of old friends, and we reveled in the excitement. I was, however, ordered off of the ubiquitous free coffee, as I was apparently talking really fast, even faster than normal, so we did some deep breathing and I practiced talking in a slowwwwww manner.

One of the best things we learned, during our pre-show briefing, was that there would be only three guests, and I was told that I did not have to rush my story, and that there would be plenty of time for Oprah to do a "deep dive". "This is a great story, and we want the audience to hear it unfold, and learn about the great work you guys are doing". Wow, that put me at ease!

The time flew by, and before we knew it, 9:00 was upon us. Following Margaret's advice, I started doing push ups to psych myself up, Kim joined in, and we both hoped that nobody would suddenly walk into the room and think we were part of some bizarre Marin Country exercise worship cult.

We watched, on our green room screen, as Oprah came onto the stage, bantered playfully with the audience, and then began to interview the first guest, a woman working with foster kids. They had a BIG surprise for her, which I am not allowed to give away, but let's just say that the surprise got the audience clapping and yelling, and brought tears to the eyes of both the guest and Oprah as it will help a lot of kids in foster homes. This could not have been a better set up for my appearance, which came next. Before I knew it, the producer was rushing me out of the room, and we ran through a few corridors and onto the stage. And there, in the middle of it all, sat Oprah on a stool. The empty stool next to her was….gulp….for me. She was being briefed by a few people, and once they were done I threw our my best and most casual "Well, hello there". She smiled, shook my hand (good grip, not too firm and not too soft) and said "I am so excited about this story". I breathed easier, and replied: "My mother and my team are big fans of yours, and they're in the audience. Can you wave to them?" "Where are the parents?" she immediately asked, and waves were exchanged. Off to a strong start.

3-2-1….we're on…..a video rolls that shows scenes of my childhood (my father actually sent in home movies, including me getting on the bus for my first day of school), my Microsoft years, and then trekking in Nepal. I'm watching it, while simultaneously watching Oprah watching it, and thinking to myself that this is all so damn surreal. Like, I'm on stage, with Oprah, and we're together watching the story of my life roll by. I know that in about 30 seconds she's going to ask the first question ("So, did you keep your promise to that headmaster and return to Nepal with books?"), and yet I am calm and relaxed and not the least bit worried. The producers have prepped me well, and Oprah has put me at east by saying great things about Room to Read's work.

I'm not supposed to say much about the show before it airs, so I am cutting myself off here, but tune in on Tuesday April 3 to see how it went J I can tell you that we could not be happier with the result, as we were able to cover almost all of the points we wanted, the flow of the interview was great, and at the end of the interview Oprah offers a call to action to her viewers. If even a small percent of those 15 million people respond, well…..let's just say that the team's main goal this weekend is to get some rest and be ready for the deluge.

This morning, from O'Hare, I got a voicemail from Kim saying that she was watching the 9 AM Chicago airing of that day's Oprah show, and they were already doing promotions for next Tuesday's show, using our Nepal video. Television, alas, is always subject to last minute changes, and the week's schedule will be posted Sunday on www.oprah.com

I hope you can tune in

I believe, based upon the feedback from our team in the audience, and my own experience with media, that we're about to surf a very huge wave, and that Room to Read's public profile is about to undergo yet another drastic evolution. I think we're ready, but also very aware that you can never really be fully ready. There is no roadmap for what happens when one appears on this show. But that is part of the fun, and all of us – the employees, the chapter leaders, and the Boards – are excited for Tuesday.

If you can, please tell your friends to set their TiVos, check us out, get involved, host a watch party, etc.

In closing…..I think our ability to affect the education of kids across the developing world is about to undergo a massive upgrade. Yahoo!! This is the dream PR hit for every charity, and the way our story was told is going to inspire a lot more people to get involved with us.

Onward and upward!
John

www.roomtoread.org

We're all about results. We have opened 287 schools, established over 3,600 bi-lingual libraries and 110 new computer and language rooms. We've put more than 2.8 million books into the hands of eager young readers, and are funding long-term scholarships for 2,336 girls. Over 1,200,000 children now have access to enhanced educational infrastructure. Together, we are changing the world through the lifelong gift of education.

Apr 25 *- Here's what Room to Read report about the amazing Oprah effect, not just on donations but on Amazon book rankings.*

As most of you know, April 3rd was a major milestone in Room to Read's history with John's appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." The episode featured individuals who are truly making a difference in the world. On top of the fact that our Founder and CEO was featured on one of the most popular shows in America, Ms. Winfrey challenged her millions of viewers worldwide to support our work by donating funds, which in turn enable us to put books into the hands of children throughout the developing world.

John did a phenomenal job of engaging Ms. Winfrey, the studio audience and the TV viewing audience in the early days of starting Room to Read as well as showing how far we have come in building a world-class organization.

Our website received record hits as the show aired across multiple time zones. Our system thankfully weathered the storm and we have processed over 4,000 donations to date totaling more than $500,000! Donations are still rolling in as people talk about the show and discuss with their family and friends how to get involved. Worldwide syndication of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" to 132 countries ensures the segment will be playing around the globe for weeks to come. Our constituent base is expanding daily as new individuals, corporations and foundations contact us to get involved.

Another great benefit of the show was the surge in interest in John's book *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*. Prior to the show airing, the book ranked 3,000th on Amazon's sales list. By the evening of April 3rd, the book had surged to 35th outselling the *Tipping Point*, *Freakanomics* and Barack Obama's *Audacity of Hope*. Harper Collins ordered a third reprint to keep up with demand. As new readers learn of John's story and discover Room to Read, our network will continue to grow as the book circulates around the globe.

Interestingly, one of the most popular pages on our website was the career opportunities page. Our HR team is excited about the new candidates this will attract and we have already received numerous emails from people wanting to work and volunteer for us. More than 300 new volunteer applications await review!

What a remarkable opportunity this has been for a relatively small organization to reach an expanded global audience and share John's story and the mission of Room to Read. Thanks to viewers of "The Oprah Winfrey Show," Room to Read will publish and print over 300,000 local language children's books. We are now one step closer to our goal of opening 20,000 libraries by the year 2020 and inspiring millions of children to read!

Apr 30 - This particular Oprah Winfrey show is being transmitted in the UK at 10.20am on Friday May 4 on ITV2.