

Heal the World, Make it a Better Place

Words
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Photos
Room To Read



Over 100 million young girls around the world will wake up each day without the most important thing in the world – hope for a better future..



Every morning, Sum Sin's mother, an illiterate fish seller, wakes up and heads to the village market. In that enclosed space, she hawks her produce for more than 12 hours. On a good day, she earns about US\$2, barely enough to support the family. On bad days, Sum Sin and her mother go hungry, praying to the Gods for a better day tomorrow. There are more bad days than good.

Sum Sin used to have a father and four siblings. Four of them – Dad and three siblings – passed away before she turned nine. Her final sister married at a young age and was tortured to death by her husband when Sin was 15. It's a tragic tale but in Cambodia, where Sin and her mother live, and many other rural countries around the world, stories like these are commonplace.

Erin Ganju knew that she could no longer sit in her cushy office chair and watch silently as the world continually put these girls through the grinder and spat them out. "When I realised that I was more passionate about my voluntary activities than I was about my full-time job dealing with investment banking, I knew that I had to switch careers," says Ganju. Today, she is the CEO of Room to Read, a non-profit organisation that supports literacy and gender equality in education, and works alongside fellow co-founders John Wood and Dinesh Shrestha as well as a dedicated team of staff and volunteers to become the social change that the world is desperately crying out for.

Listening to Erin passionately explain the programmes that Room to Read runs – establishing libraries, constructing classrooms, training educators, etc. – is a much-

welcomed shot in the arm for a first-world citizen like me, so used to electricity at the flick of a switch and with most of my daily problems consisting of what to eat for lunch. This first-world privilege that we possess is both a boon and a curse. We live in relative comfort while folks like Sin suffer in abject poverty, simply because the genetic roulette favoured us.

In fact, first-world privilege is an important issue that the folks at Room to Read have bravely tackled. Erin regularly brings her own young daughter on her mission trips to Asia, exposing her to a side of the world she rarely sees. She similarly advocates Singaporeans parents to do the same, for sowing the seeds of empathy in a young child moulds them to grow up and become a responsible global citizen. "One of the most incredible gifts you can provide your child is to teach them about the world and give them an insight into how it's like to grow up in another country through books and videos," says Erin. "Children love to read stories and pictures from other children and there are so many age-appropriate ways to teach them how to be a global citizen and to contribute their time, their money, their talents, etc."

Thanks to Erin's capable leadership, Room to Read has grown from a small start-up to a global organisation that is changing lives in 10 countries. And her tireless work hasn't gone unrecognised. Fast Company recognised her as one of its Extraordinary Women for 2012 and in 2014, the World Economic Forum chose her to be one of its Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneurs.

Nothing gives Erin more joy, though, than seeing first-hand the social impact of the work she puts in every day, the reason why she bolts out of bed the moment the alarm clock rings instead of hitting the snooze button. Sum Sin is one of the 27,000 reasons that makes Erin



smile. "We started a programme to ensure that more young girls could stay in school for as many years as possible, until they at least have a secondary-level education. We focus on empowering the girls and ensuring that they have the skills required to continue staying in school," says Erin.

How much of a financial and economic impact is Erin and her team making to the lives of Sin and the rest of the other girls? According to data from UNESCO, for every year that a girl in a third-world country stays in high school, her earning potential increases between 10 and 20 percent. "So, if you get her to 12th grade, her family's chances of economic prosperity will be drastically different," says Erin. "Considering that most girls give 90 percent of their wages back to the family, investing in the education of young girls ultimately pays off not only for her parents but for her community as well."

Sum Sin, a beneficiary of the Room to Read scholarship, recently completed a reading and writing instruction programme for teachers and is now equipped to teach Grade Three students. It was a long, hard slog, marked with taunts from neighbours who thought she would amount to nothing more than a fish seller and disdain from those who thought she was wasting her time and money on a silly thing called education. Sin never wavered though. She shares: "No matter what other people said, I believe in myself and believe that I will achieve my dream of becoming a teacher. I see that many people have better lives because they are educated. This is the miracle of education. Whenever I think about it, my heart swells."

And so do our hearts.

Room to Read has a Singapore chapter. If you're looking to volunteer your time and/or talents, do drop them an email at Singapore@RoomtoRead.org.

