

# Charity Spotlights

## Reading to Kids: *on the front lines and behind the scenes*

by Jeffrey Scott Parsons

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Consider these staggering statistics:

Over 116,000 books given to kids. More than 21,000 books read aloud and donated to school libraries. At least 15,000 volunteers. 2 employees.

The fact that non-profit organizations are able to do anything at all often blows my mind. Never has this been more evident than when I recently visited the Reading to Kids headquarters in West Los Angeles where they inspire "underserved children with a love of reading."



I had already been volunteering with this organization for ten months before I went to their offices and met Managing Director, Charlie Orchard.

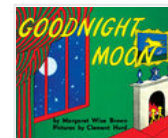
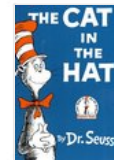
It was a different approach for [theroadbackhome.com](http://theroadbackhome.com), which traditionally investigates and publishes a Charity Spotlight before launching into volunteer support.

This time, however, I thought it'd be more interesting to volunteer first, create my own memories and opinions of Reading to Kids, and then meet the people behind the scenes.

For almost a year, I participated in their Reading Clubs as a volunteer reader and grade level coordinator in addition to organizing a group donation for their annual School Supply Drive. I felt like I understood their strengths, their challenges, and even more importantly, I felt like I knew the kids. That is, after all, who Reading to Kids was created for.

It started in 1999 when a group of volunteers, teachers, and administrators came together with the same goal in mind: to improve reading skills among elementary school children near inner city Los Angeles.

What was created from that initial meeting was the first Reading Club at Gratts Elementary. Since then, seven different elementary schools in Los Angeles have joined in, all of which host Reading Clubs on the second



***"The single most important activity for building the knowledge required***

Saturday of every month.

At these clubs, volunteers meet to read books, previously chosen by teachers books, to small groups of kids. After 30 minutes of reading, the group participates in a craft activity that ties the month's theme with the reading material, and then each child is presented with a prize book they can take home.

The monthly Reading Clubs average over 800 students and 340 volunteers across the seven schools.

Now, let's take a moment to consider the magnitude of this achievement. Not only is Reading to Kids able to convince children to wake up and go to school on a Saturday morning, but they're able to convince adults to do it as well. Speaking as an adult who has participated, I promise you the free bagels and juice help a lot.

But the real reason I go is the kids. I go because of the kid I met one Saturday that did NOT want to be there, but lit up for at least five seconds when I asked if he had a dog. I go because of the chubby third grader in one of my groups that kept talking about how badly he wanted a Pop Tart.

The one I'll never forget, though, was a fifth grader that one Saturday shared his anxieties with me about eventually going to the middle school across the street. It's a place that, according to him, is known for violence, and he asked me what he should do. After a deep breath, I started talking, hoping that something leaving my mouth would offer a little peace. I told him the good news about going to the middle school is now it will be safer because of him. His attending the school will automatically make it a better place to be.

I go to Reading to Kids because of him. And I hope that when I do, it's good enough.



Charlie Orchard assures me that it is. This organization has grown to do what it does because the volunteers, and their efforts, are always good enough.

"It's always been volunteers," he told me. "It's always been that way. Hundreds if not thousands of people support what we do."

We've never had more than three people running this whole thing at a time. And a lot of times it's been two people. It's pretty draining for two people."

Which brings me back to how I began all this: 116,000 books to kids. 21,000 books to schools. 15,000 volunteers. 2 employees.

The only way Reading to Kids fulfills its mission statement is through thousands of people working together under the common belief that children's literacy is essential. Otherwise, the work wouldn't get done.

In 1995, the National Commission on Reading concluded, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children."

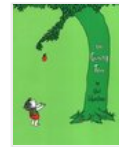
"It's one of the things we kind of know intuitively," Orchard says. And yet, in a recent Reading to Kids presentation to a room full of parents, only two raised their hands when asked how many read aloud to their children.

Just another reason why the work Reading to Kids does is so important. It's up to us, however, to make that work joyful.

If you're living in the Los Angeles area and want to volunteer one or countless times a year, visit [www.readingtokids.org](http://www.readingtokids.org) to get started. After registering, you can volunteer to be a reader, serve on one of the many committees that keep the organization flowing, or make a monetary donation to keep their impressive statistics growing. Regardless of how you choose to participate, do it by tapping into that joy, that childhood wonderment that must be present at every Reading Club. It's what the kids have taught me: You have to use your imagination. You can't get stuck in adulthood. And you need to act like a fool every now and then. For those lessons, and so much more, I will always be grateful to Reading to Kids.

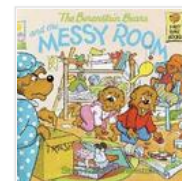
It what makes "the road" worth traveling. And in the case of this organization, it's what makes the signs along that road a little more readable.

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*-Charlie Orchard*



**TheRoadBackHome.com Spotlights Reading to Kids  
for making the road of every child a little more readable**

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