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'I was just stunned:' A Wauwatosa woman bequeaths \$4.6 million to a global nonprofit for children's literacy

EVAN CASEY | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

It all started with a handwritten letter, addressed to the San Francisco office of a global nonprofit. Next, it was a series of phone calls with Cicely Wootan.

To this day, Wootan has never met Helen face to face. Sadly, she never will.

But Helen's legacy will continue for years and years after her 2021 death.

That's because Helen, a librarian and teacher from Wauwatosa, gave \$4.6 million to Room to Read, a global nonprofit that teaches children in low-income countries.

The donation will touch more than 15,000 young girls.

"She clearly dedicated herself to educating children. It was her career, it was her philanthropic interest, and now it's her legacy, which to me is such an amazing testament that a teacher and a librarian contributed so much during their life and after," said Wootan, Room to Read's senior director for global partnerships.

Helen, whose full name was not shared with a reporter out of respect to her family's wishes, heard about Room to Read through an advertisement in a Neiman Marcus Christmas catalog.

Her husband and sister had already died, according to a spokesperson with the nonprofit. She had no children.

Wootan started speaking with Helen in 2019 after Helen wrote the nonprofit a letter.

Wootan knew Helen had wanted to donate her house to the nonprofit, but she wasn't sure how much money that would come to. She thought it might be about \$400,000.

But when Helen died at age 84 earlier this year, Wootan learned the extent of the gift Helen left the organization: just over \$4.6 million.

Helen named Room to Read as the sole beneficiary of her estate.

Wootan didn't believe it at first; she thought it might have been a typo.

It wasn't.

And it left her in tears.

"I was just stunned," Wootan said. "And frankly, I was in tears at the power of her contribution. I had no idea."

It's the largest legacy donation the nonprofit, which was founded in 2000, has ever received.

Helen's gift will help an estimated 15,300 participants in the nonprofit's Girls Education Program.

The program enables girls to "learn and practice life skills through classes, workshops and extracurricular activities with community mentors to guide the way," according to Room to Read CEO Geetha Murali.

It all started with a letter



Children in Zambia read a book together through one of Room to Read's literacy programs. The global nonprofit has benefited over 23 million children across ... [Show more](#) ▼
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After writing to Room to Read in 2019, Helen connected with Wootan over the phone.

They would have many phone conversations over the next two years.

Wootan, who works in New York, said Helen would often call her the "New York agent."

"I felt like it was a special title I had with her," she said.

After every phone conversation, Helen would send a follow-up letter in the mail.

It was a special relationship.

Wootan organized a letter-writing campaign with other Room to Read staff who would send Helen letters.

Wootan would also send her children's books from the nonprofit as she kept her up to date on what was happening with the organization.

So why did she decide to give to Room to Read?

Wootan said she believes Helen was drawn to the Girls Education Program.

"She felt passionate about girls having an equal opportunity to educate themselves," Wootan said.

Helping others during a pandemic



Room to Read, which has benefited children in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Grenada, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa, Sri Lanka, ... [Show more](#) ▾

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Wootan said the donation couldn't have come at a better time.

"With the current pandemic and the impact that COVID-19 has had across the world, our students have been in an education crisis for almost two years now, and this is the moment in time where they need Room to Read's support and everyone's support now more than ever," she said.

"There is just an unbelievable amount of children right now who are not being educated, who are not able to be in school," she added.

Room to Read has benefited more than 23 million children in more than 48,000 communities across the world.

Its literacy program trains teachers, creates books and curriculum materials and even establishes libraries in communities. The Girls Education Program provides

The nonprofit also collaborates with local governments and communities to "test and implement innovative models that can be integrated into the education system to deliver positive outcomes for children at scale," according to Murali.

"I was honored by her faith in us and immediately thought about the tens of thousands of children Helen's legacy gift will benefit, especially during a time when the education crisis persists," Murali said. "The pandemic continues to create the greatest education emergency in our lifetimes. Many of the world's most vulnerable children remain without access to learning resources and at risk of never returning to school."

Learn more about Room to Read at www.roomtoread.org.

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