

Have you ever wanted to change the world?

Our Parrot Head phlock set out on a mission, only we didn't know our mission was going to change the world. We wanted to give a simple gift; **the gift of literacy to the first graders of an elementary school in our community.** We thought the day would be simple. Instead we were moved and impacted in ways unimagined as we saw the emotion in the faces of the children who sat cross-legged in front of us.

The sun breached the morning horizon and shown in reflection from the elementary school sign. The morning is brisk. **The scents of the holidays are in the air.** Items are wrapped in paper donning princesses, superheroes, cars, and kittens. Juice boxes and cookies are packed with care. We mark down our calendar days as giddy as children. Is it time yet? Can we go now? Final calls are placed to the principal and teachers. Final emails are sent to club members. Every check box is filled and not a single T is left uncrossed. **Event day is a GO...**

In the early morning our phlock awakes and begins their preparations for the day. In mirrors across our community shark hats are tried on, hamburger hats are tilted front and back and front again, feathered earrings are set in place, and shirts with Hawaiian flowers and bedazzling are tucked and fitted. One last glance in the mirror is made as each Parrot Head puts on that one finishing touch, our lanyard. **These tell who we are, show our Parrot Head pride, and remind us that everyday it is our task to live the motto, "Party with a Purpose."**

Dressed in our Sunday best, although we may be skirting the line between **Saturday night and Sunday morning**, we gather in the school parking lot. Community outreach is the cornerstone of our club, from road clean-up tasks to food drives, from collecting aluminum tabs for Ronald McDonald House to cleaning up the local Macaw Rescue and Bird Park. **We are our community.** Today, however, is a turning point in the life of our club. Today is the day that giving back to our community changes us deeper than ever before. Today is the day that we would understand our impact and are reminded of the **greater good in this world.**

But wait, we need to step back a moment. Back to the beginning of how we arrived at standing on an elementary school bus loading ramp dressed in feathers, hats, and sparkles.

Each year our club has a **holiday charity.** We had been impacting the lives of one or two families with our holiday giving, which was great, but we wanted something more. **The question was WHAT?** It turns out that if you want to impact the world, you have to start with those individuals **who will one day run the world.** According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) **children who are read to at home** have higher success rates at school. They have higher testing scores, even in math. They become more proficient in language skills, which increase future success during higher education and entering the work force.

This information wasn't new to members of our club. The realization was new. Our crazy idea about how to impact the success of future leaders was clear - **BOOKS!** In that single moment our club rallied around the idea of making it our purpose to bring **literacy into the lives of local children.** With the idea came who, where, and how questions. Easily enough all of these questions were answered with a call to a friend of a friend. Soon we were in touch with the principal of an elementary school in a **socioeconomically challenged area** of our community. To say they were delighted about the idea would be an understatement. **They were over the moon!**

The details of the day were worked out. We played to our club strengths. **We like to help, and we like to party.** We knew we could throw the best first grade party **EVER**. As with any holiday party we needed to plan for gifts and food. The food was easy once we realized you have to buy items instead of bake and bring things without peanuts. It was the gift part that would begin to turn the wheels of inspiration inside of us.

The gift would be a new hardcover book in the hands of each student in the classroom. It would not belong to the school or the teacher. **This was the child's book - their adventure.** The club created a list of books to help with shopping. A tree was brought to club events for months adorned with color-coded paper ornaments displaying the names of children on its branches. It was exciting to see a **child's name picked up by a member** and talk of books being ordered. Many of our club members laughed as they recalled **reading these books** to their children or having **their life forever changed** by "a mouse who was given a cookie." Before the children even knew of the books, these books were loved.

In the weeks leading up to the **BIG DAY**, wrapping parties were held (we said we like to party). Wine was sipped as **we read about how dragons like tacos** or how Princess Posey met the dog next door. A conveyor system was created: wrapping paper cut, book selected, tape handed, corners folded with care, and then an ornament with a name affixed on top. **Each book was delicately placed in a box** for its classroom. As the party drew to a close final counts were made and names double checked. Last minute books were gathered and wrapped. In an amazing turn of events, there were extra books. Books we left unwrapped. **Were these unneeded books?**

Oh, no, we had an extra special place for these books. It turns out our club members got a little excited in their book buying and bought one or two more just-in-case. The extra books were split up and stacked then wrapped with a bow. **These books were going to be even more special...**

With books and cookies and juice boxes, and **Parrot Head spirit**, the phlock entered the office of the elementary school. For some this was obviously not their first time in the Principal's office. It may not have even been the first time they made a Principal cry. **These tears were different.** This principal knew something in that moment that our members would learn in moments to come. She knew we were about to **change the world** for many of the young children in her first grade classes. So what do you have to do before you can change the world? You have to put on a school issued visitor badge! And they don't come in fun colors to match our attire, but we were rule followers for today.

We made our way to the **first grade hall**. Let's face it we relate to 6 year olds the best so this hall made us feel at ease, with finger painted pictures and misspelled words. We split into our teams, each entering a classroom. As the children giggled and pointed at our hats and bedazzled outfits **the teachers told of our story, and that we were there for a very special purpose.** We told the children that we had heard they were working hard on their reading skills and we wanted to help with their journey. The phlock began to hand out the wrapped books. Each child waited until they all had their gifts. Then paper flew and shiny new books appeared in each child's hand. And as children do with new toys they wanted to play with the books. **The unsuspecting phlock members were handed books and asked to read;** children were gathering in circles on the floor and around tables. They were smiling and laughing, listening to the books of others being read and then carefully offering their own book to be read next. They hugged the books like blankets to keep them safe. **Each book was a treasure.**

Those tears we had seen before on members of the school administration showed up on the cheeks of the first grade teachers. They knew what we still did not yet grasp. **We had changed the world!**

We passed out juice and cookies. We read books. We laughed at silly dogs and told the moon good night a hundred times. As the party drew to an end the children helped to clean up. A few even asked if we would rewrap their books so they could take them home to open with their family, **as no other gift would be opened that season.**

I nearly forgot to tell you about those special extra books. **We had enough books to split amongst the individual classrooms to each grow their own classroom library.** These special books will live in the classroom to take future children on adventures. Prior to this gift the teachers had to **purchase their own books** for any in-classroom library. This area of a classroom is a sanctuary for a child. The teacher's cups runneth over, and the tears poured out.

The holidays passed, as they always do, and stories were told at socials and club events about this boy or that girl and how much they loved their books. We shared stories of reading and being read to. **We shared with other members the joy on the face of the child who opened the book that member purchased.** Our club was already committed to doing this event as a regular part of our year. We decided when school was back in after the Christmas break we would reach out and see if we could come back next year. Before we had the chance to make that phone call, we got a request to visit the **Principal one more time.** This put panic in our hearts. Were the books wrong? Did a parent get mad? Did the juice contain red dye number 5, and we now were going to jail?

None of these things were the reason for that call. Instead at the front desk was a box addressed to the club--**a box of handmade cards and letters saying "thank you!"** With each card more tears fell. This was that moment when it sunk in for our phlock. **We had changed the world.** These cards spoke of family time reading, of siblings opening the book again at home, and of children learning about the wonders of reading. In the weeks to come our phlock would welcome these first grade teachers to talk about their experiences and **those precious paper gifts.**

Our Parrot Head group has a special bond with this school and their students. We have this event every year now. When we show up the tears start, even from the front desk staff; visitor passes are handed out; the march down the hall is taken; the party is had; **and in the end a book is put in the hand of a child and their world is forever changed.**