

Serving Low-Income Families Through Quality
Literature

By Nicole Westmoreland

It was 1996 and Judy Koch, CEO of RSP Manufacturing in Fremont, California, was having one of the most profitable years of her career. Her company had tripled its revenues. Koch felt a deep sense of gratitude to her mostly Mexican immigrant workforce for their hard work and contribution to the company's success. So in addition to customary bonuses and raises, she wanted to give her employees a special gift to show her indebtedness to them. Ultimately, Koch gave the gift of literacy and the enjoyment of reading to the families of her employees.

As a former school teacher, Koch knows firsthand how important it is for parents to read aloud to their children to ensure future educational success. Her employees were mostly immigrant parents for whom pricey, high-quality children's books were not typically a budget priority. Additionally, many of them did not speak English well enough to read aloud to their children. So Koch created the first corporate Book Bag Library inside RSP.

Koch appealed for help to design the program to her former mentor, Kay Goines, a renowned early childhood educator who had produced a similar lending library for preschools. Goines chose the books as well as the audio recorded readings (in both English and Spanish) of the classic books for parents to learn how to read stories aloud.

One of her employees told Koch that before the Book Bag library was created, his wife had little confidence in her English speaking skills and would not take classes. But after reading the books aloud to her children, she realized she knew more words than she thought. She then signed up for ESL classes and is now in community college. "While we set out to help the employee's kids through quality literature, we have also found that the positive results affect the adults in each family who use the library as well," says Koch.

The idea became one of the favorite employee benefits at RSP Manufacturing. In fact, the idea was so popular, Koch decided to expand it to the broader community, focusing on the companies that employed large numbers of immigrant employees. Her program met a huge need: According to literacy

researcher Jeff McQuillan, author of "The Literacy Crisis" 61 percent of low-income families in California have no age-appropriate books for children in their homes. And thus, the Bring Me A Book Foundation (BMABF) was born.

The Workplace Niche

After selling RSP in 1999, Koch took the concept a step forward by packaging the product in a way that made it easy for any company to start a book lending program. The Book Bags are preassembled with 3-4 hardcover books (one of which is in Spanish) and audio recordings. Classics that follow the exploits of such famous children's characters as Babar and Curious George are mixed with newer stories that teach valuable lessons in illustrative detail.

One important issue for employers was creating space for all of these books. Koch made sure the book bags fit into a narrow cabinet that could fit into almost any hallway, lunch room, or shop floor. Additionally, a computer is provided so employees can check bags in and out by themselves. Koch's program, which aims to be financially self-sustaining, charges employers \$9,000 per workplace library to cover the costs of the program.

"We've had really good usage of the book library at our facility. We hear good things from our employees, and they see it as an invaluable family benefit," says Michael Polano, Vice President, Western Region for SANMINA-SCI, an electronics contract manufacturer in Fremont. "I also bring my visiting customers by the bookshelf so they can see firsthand how much we care about our employees and their families. It serves as a dual benefit for us."

The Non-Profit Angle

Unbeknownst to Koch, an even more pressing need for books existed in the non-profit world, where money was even tighter and resources were just as necessary. Organizations such as Goodwill Industries, preschools for low-income children, Boys & Girls Clubs, and homeless shelters can either get the Book Bag Library for a discounted price of \$6,000, or a second product developed by BMABF.

Called the BookCase Library, a small or large bookshelf is stocked with 30-50 quality children's books customized to meet the age and demographics of the children being served. This book shelf is

funded by private donors who get their logo or names on a plaque signifying their donation of \$500-\$600.

Servicing non-profits has been the most fruitful and immediate push thus far for BMABF. They currently have libraries in 15 locations, most of which are non-profits. "We hope to grow by leaps and bounds over the next few years to reach even more low-income families in the workplace as well as at the organizations they use," says Koch.

At Opportunities Industrialization Center West (OICW), a job training organization on the East Palo Alto-Menlo Park border, the library has been a very convenient service. "It provides the employees with books that they can so conveniently take home and enjoy with their children," says Sharon Williams, Executive Director of OICW. "They don't have to make time to visit the public library and search for quality books for their kids. It's right at their fingertips."

OICW employee Stephen Baiter likes to take books home for his daughter. "With the click of a mouse, I have 3 or 4 quality books that will inspire and teach my daughter."

First Teachers

The third product created by Koch and her staff is First Teacher Training. This program is designed to educate parents and teachers on the critical importance of reading quality books aloud to young children.

They created the curriculum from scratch because nothing like this had been developed before. With a grant from the Mid-Peninsula Junior League, they taught the parents in the community about topics including early brain development, overcoming barriers to reading, and finding resources in the community. This pilot program proved very successful and Koch has plans to expand it widely.

The training curriculum was developed as a product that the foundation's plans to sell to other literacy non-profits and service organizations who are training parents about the importance of reading aloud, early childhood brain development, read aloud strategies, and introducing parents to their local library.

Getting to the Next Level

Koch believes BMABF is now primed for huge growth. "We've fine-tuned our products and services, so we are now ready to market them to the region, nationally, and eventually internationally," she says. The organization is currently servicing more than 10,500 families in over 130 sites.

The business model of BMABF is built on the premise of becoming self-sustaining by covering all their costs. Achieving this goal will be the mission of the new incoming president, Dianne Calvi, who for the last 12 years ran her own management consulting firm called Prevailing Winds LLC.

"Bring Me A Book's award-winning programs have the potential to reach millions of children throughout world," says Calvi. "Bringing the organization to the next level will require an investment in infrastructure and human resources, strategic partnerships in both the nonprofit and corporate sectors, and thorough market analysis and strategic planning."

Koch believes networking—particularly through the Social Fusion incubator of which the foundation is a member—has been the key to making BMABF successful "Social Fusion has been a major

contributor to our future success," says Koch.
"Through them, I was introduced to the right people to help me build my team and find the best resources for my non-profit venture. Coming from the for-profit world, I didn't have the right network to help me get connected. Social Fusion gives you the invaluable expertise of its incredible network."

Koch, through her work for the foundation, recently won the "Philanthropic Innovator" award of 2004 from the Committee of 200, an international women entrepreneurs' organization.