

Innovative Literacy Program Draws on the Past to Bridge Cultures Here and in the Islamic World

Calif. Nonprofit Uses Timeless Tales from Asia & the Middle East to Promote Reading, Tolerance & Thinking Skills among Disadvantaged Kids in the U.S. & Abroad

LOS ALTOS, CA, USA, April 4, 2017 /EINPresswire.com/ -- If you characterize an enterprise by the depth of its influence, tiny Hoopoe Books is the proverbial "mouse that roared." Since 2000, the Los Altos, California-based nonprofit has reached out to millions of disadvantaged children to promote not only literacy, but also thinking skills and multicultural understanding – and not just in the U.S. and Canada, but also in Afghanistan, Pakistan and, soon, other parts of the Islamic world.



Hoopoe's beautifully illustrated children's books are based on traditional tales from South and Central Asia and the Middle East, most of them collected and adapted for children by Afghan author Idries Shah. All but one title depict the people, clothing, architecture and animals indigenous to those parts of the world – which goes a long way toward fostering universal acceptance and understanding, to say nothing of ethnic pride.

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"For children, a book is not just a lens through which they see the world; it's also a mirror in which they see themselves," says Hoopoe director Sally Mallam. "So in addition to promoting tolerance by centering on characters who look different, these books also help instill a healthy sense of identity in people whose roots are in those cultures."

But the tales themselves – which are part of a rich oral tradition and have been told continuously for hundreds of years – are not culture-specific. Rather, they focus on universal themes such as problem-solving, building self-esteem, negotiation versus confrontation, overcoming difficulties and finding peaceful solutions. And they've been commended by Western educators and psychologists, the Library of Congress, National Public Radio and others for their unique ability to foster social-emotional development, thinking skills and perception in children and adults alike.

"In the West, most stories of this kind have become 'Disneyfied' – that is, only those elements that have a strong emotional appeal have been selected and retold," says Mallam. "But that blunts the story's effectiveness. If left intact, these tales are remarkably sophisticated tools that can foster mental flexibility and empathy, help us all learn and broaden our understanding of ourselves and the world around us."



That's because Hoopoe's stories aren't simplistic moral fables, Mallam says, but instead are much more complex and productive, leading the mind down subtle and often unexpected pathways. For example, in "Neem the Half-Boy," a young boy who confronts a dragon chooses empathy and peaceful negotiation over the usual sword-wielding bravado. And in "Fatima the Spinner and the Tent," a girl comes to see that events which seemed at the time to be calamitous were actually integral keys to her eventual happiness and fulfillment.



An imprint of the educational nonprofit Institute for the Study of Human

Knowledge, Hoopoe was founded in 1998 and two years later launched [Share Literacy](#), a program that so far has distributed more than 840,000 Hoopoe books and related materials for teachers and parents – in English, Spanish and bilingual English-Spanish editions – to disadvantaged children and their teachers throughout the U.S. and Canada, working through Head Start and other established literacy programs.

But Hoopoe's outreach hasn't stopped there. Since 2007, through its trailblazing [Books for Afghanistan](#) program, Hoopoe has provided – with the help of implementing partners in Kabul – more than 4.4 million of its books, most of them in Pashto-Dari editions, to NGOs, schools, orphanages and street children in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, which has one of the world's highest illiteracy rates. Over 2.5 million of those books were funded by a grant from the U.S. State Department. In addition, Hoopoe has trained more than 550 Afghan teachers in modern, well-researched strategies to use its books to teach students literacy and thinking skills that will provide them with a solid foundation for learning. And along with self-explanatory Teacher Guides to be used with the books in Afghanistan, Hoopoe has also created audio versions of the stories for classroom use there, as well as programs for local Afghan radio.

"The Books for Afghanistan program provides a first step to family literacy, because it engages more children than just those who receive books directly," Mallam observes. "Many parents note that their children not only read to them and their neighbors, but also teach their family and friends to read using the books." So it's small wonder that schools, libraries, orphanages and other institutions all over Afghanistan are clamoring for more Hoopoe books – which are the only illustrated books

available in bilingual Dari-Pashto editions.

"These stories foster a flexibility of mind that can't coexist with extremist beliefs," explains Mallam. "The fact that the tales are native to the cultures of this region creates a bridge between the more conservative elders – many of whom remember them from childhood – and the younger generation, boys and girls, who must become literate, thinking members of their society in order to fully participate in it."

A similar program to Books for Afghanistan, [Books for Pakistan](#), was launched by Hoopoe in 2011 and has so far provided about 100,000 Pakistani children with Hoopoe books in Urdu-English, Urdu-Sindhi and Urdu-Pashto editions, along with Teacher Guides. These same books are being translated into Arabic for use in other Muslim countries – as well as into minority Afghan languages such as Uzbek, Turkmen and Swaji. And Hoopoe has recently published English-Dari, English-Pashto and English-Urdu editions of these books to help children of the Afghan and Pakistani diasporas in the English-speaking world read in their own languages as well as English. The books are available through Amazon and other booksellers.

"If people only knew more about the lives of so-called 'others,' they'd realize how much we all have in common and that we can all learn from each other," says Mallam. "It's very, very difficult to change the minds of adults, as we all know; but young children are much more flexible and open-minded. Their natural reaction is not to be put off by people who seem different from themselves, but rather to be intrigued and want to learn more."

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