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—STEVE TUCKER

Beautiful Minds

Sue and Steve Tucker spread the gifts of reading and creativity, one child at a time. BY LAUREN SIMON PHOTOS BY KRI SADO

WHEN YOU'RE ABLE TO SIMPLY PICK UP A BOOK AND READ IT FOR PLEASURE, education or inspiration, it's difficult to imagine such a wondrous gift eluding your grasp. Yet as many as 560,000 Orange County adults cannot read English well enough to sign a simple form or add basic amounts on a bank deposit slip.

Two Newport Beach residents, Stephen and Sue Tucker, are committed to changing those numbers by working to improve literacy both here in Orange County and around the world. He is chairman/president of The International Literacy Project, which develops such phonetic reading products as Get Set Read!; she is co-founder of the Literacy Project Foundation, a non-profit organization based in Newport Beach that provides free literacy products and instructors to Title 1 and low-income schools with high drop-out rates and low reading scores.

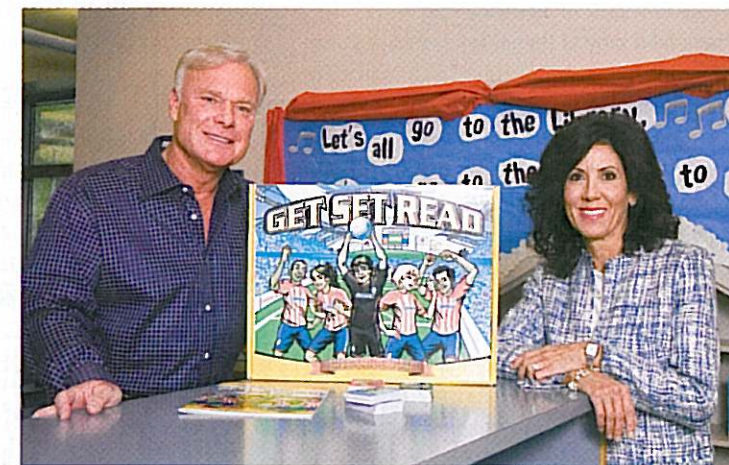
Steve became involved in literacy in the 1980s after he sold his company, Tucker Air Containers, and was serving on the board of World Vision International, a Christian relief, development and advocacy organization. "I realized the masses were controlled by the few who are educated," Steve says. "I saw that the plight of the people there [in northwestern Africa] is due to their lack of education. If they are illiterate, there is no opportunity for them to become contributing members of society. I knew then I wanted to try to make a difference."

In 1995, Steve was invited to join the founding investors of The Phonics Game, an educational product promoting phonetic learning. "I jumped right in and also became executive vice president to become more involved," he says. "Through this business endeavor, my philanthropic passion blossomed into wanting to invest both time and resources into causes that gave people the foundation of learning and the gift of literacy."

Steve and Sue were not yet married back then, but her life path also included efforts to promote literacy. For her work, she received the California Congress of Parents, Teachers and Students Honorary Service Award in 1988. "When my kids started school, I joined the PTA to see where I could help," she says. "Since my PR firm specialized in special event planning, it was natural for me to offer to chair an annual fundraiser. Literacy was my platform because I realized that reading was the baseline to success, so I created a win-win fundraiser, increasing kid's reading scores by learning their core spelling words through a spelling bee competition while raising funds for the PTA's special projects."

Grand Theatrics

Sue is also working to reopen the historic 1928 Balboa Theater in Balboa Village. "I was on the ground floor when the community and city stepped up to save it," she says. "The Balboa Performing Arts Theater will be the cool place for families. This new venue, about which Steve and I are so excited, will be a place for families to enjoy the whole range of performing arts with their children and grandchildren. It's where children of all ages will be able to create and express themselves in music, dance, theater and art in an atmosphere that is ... totally engaging."



"We all realize the educational system's cutbacks and the great losses for our children," Sue says. "The theater will sponsor after-school arts education programs to make it easy for the children to attend, learn important skills and stimulate their creativity. Like literacy, we know that creativity is a life skill that will help each child in school, as well as in all aspects of their adult life. Unlike other available arts education programs, this theater will offer a professional stage to share their talents with family, friends and the community. We have nothing like it in Orange County, Newport Beach is the perfect epicenter, and we will all be the beneficiaries of its success."

Meanwhile, Steve expanded his efforts in support of the local community by attending the Orange County Sheriff Academy, where he trained to become a reserve deputy and graduated as Rookie of the Year. "It was quite an honor and quite a task," he says. Steve currently works as a volunteer reserve lieutenant in the Special Projects Division and with the county's Homeland Security division.

When they're not championing their causes separately or together, Sue and Steve enjoy golf at Big Canyon Country Club, walks around Balboa Island and cruises throughout the harbor in their electric boat. But with five grown children and two grandchildren locally, family time is the special priority in their lives; they especially delight in their newfound hobby of babysitting the grandkids.

Their first date was at Morton's The Steakhouse, which remains a favorite dinner spot, along with Tradition by Pascal, The Winery, Rothschild's, Bluewater Grill and Bayside Restaurant. Then it's back home for a quick night's sleep before starting out again. After all, there is so much work to do. ◊