

Prepared remarks by William H. Gates Sr., co-chair

Thank you, Deborah.

It's almost impossible to believe that Deborah just started at the foundation last week. I spent my first week in the office trying to find the lunch room. Deborah is already fine-tuning her strategy.

And I second her observations about her transition from U.S. to global libraries. For the last decade, our foundation has been following the same trajectory.

In the United States and around the world, our commitment to libraries comes down to one idea: the power of knowledge to change lives. That's true here in Quebec, it's true in Latvia, and it's true in Botswana. Libraries are the leaders in the public information business, and an informed public is healthier, wealthier, and wiser.

My son has based his career—first in business and now in philanthropy—on that conviction. The quest for knowledge has been dear to him as long as I can remember. When I was a young father, I often wondered if I was running a shuttle service from our house to the library. Bill devoured books, and he always needed more.

He was always reading. Always. Every summer, his teachers handed out a summer reading list and offered a prize to the student who read the most. The young girls of Northeast Seattle won that contest every year until Bill came along.

Bill liked reading so much that he refused to stop, even during dinner. His mother and I did our best to convince him that some dining companions might be offended by that particular habit. But he was just obsessed with learning about absolutely everything, all the time.

We used to keep a big dictionary in the den, and every time an unfamiliar word came up in conversation, one of the children looked it up and read the definition out loud. Bill likes to say this tradition reinforced the notion that if you have a question, the answer probably exists somewhere. In a dictionary. On the Internet. All you have to do is go find it. And for hundreds of millions of people, the place to find answers is at the library.

That is why Bill and Melinda started their philanthropy by helping pretty much every library in the United States get hooked up to the Internet. For two people who believed so fervently in both knowledge and technology, it was a natural pairing. That project started in 1997. By 2001, the vast majority of U.S. libraries were online, and we've been working with them ever since to make sure it stays that way.

As Bill and Melinda got more interested in the issue of global development, their passion for public information began to extend to other countries. There are so many people in the world with potential that's locked up—because they're sick, because they're hungry, because they're poor. Libraries can help them unlock that potential.

Learning is one of the key links between the way people live and the way they aspire to live. People are naturally driven to lead a healthy, productive life. And the library gives them the tools they need to build that life.

That is why the foundation gives the Access to Learning Award every year. There are innovators all over the world who find creative ways to help people give themselves the gift of knowledge.

This afternoon, I am proud to announce the recipient of the 2008 Access to Learning Award: the Vasconcelos Program in Veracruz, Mexico.

Veracruz is a rural state. Its towns and villages are poor and remote. There isn't enough electricity or equipment or money or staff to make sure that every one of them can maintain a good library with computers and Internet access. A lot of these places have technology centers that don't get used, because the equipment is broken down and, in any case, people don't have the training they need to use it.

So the Vasconcelos Program delivers all the resources people need via bus. Top of the line equipment. A skilled, dedicated staff. When Vasconcelos visits a community, it opens up new worlds of opportunity.

When I was young, we had lots of book mobiles in the United States. They provided a great service. And that's kind of how I thought about Vasconcelos until I learned details about the project. You see, Vasconcelos is so much more.

First, staffers visit each community before the bus comes to learn what people actually need. Then it creates a curriculum that is relevant to their day to day lives. Vasconcelos doesn't believe in one-size-fits-all solutions.

When the bus comes to town, an army of skilled staffers works morning, noon, and night teaching as many people as humanly possible. Finally, before the bus leaves, Vasconcelos provides technical support to make sure the local technology center is up and running, and staffers run trainings so people know how to use the center. The bus can only stay in each place for two weeks. But Vasconcelos's presence is permanent.

Let me give you a few examples of how Vasconcelos has changed people's lives, in large and small ways. First, the large: Coffee is key to the economy of Veracruz, and Vasconcelos is helping to grow that industry. Thousands of coffee farmers have worked with Vasconcelos's staffers to build up their businesses. They learn how to look up coffee prices so they can make more strategic marketing decisions. They get loans to expand their operations. And they participate in government-sponsored fertilizer programs that help increase their yields.

And there are countless small examples. One craftsman, a candlemaker, produced a brochure to help him sell his products—with Vasconcelos's help. Two things have happened as a result. He is earning more money, and more people in more places are being exposed to the beautiful, traditional art he makes.

All of you in the audience have success stories like these. But there is another aspect of Vasconcelos's success that you may or may not share.

Vasconcelos has strong support from the government of the state of Veracruz.

I am very pleased to recognize a special guest here today who demonstrates this commitment: the honorable Governor of Veracruz, Fidel Herrera Beltrán.

Governor, thank you for being with us for this announcement. And than you for your support of the Vasconcelos Program and increasing access to information and knowledge for the people of Veracruz and throughout Mexico.

The secretary of education, Victor Arredondo, also here today, set up the Vasconcelos Program, he helps oversee it, and he makes sure it gets the funding it needs. In fact, the government has recently set aside more money to buy additional buses and computers.

For so many of you and your colleagues, this is the missing ingredient. You understand the importance of what you do, but the people who make decisions about library funding do not.

It is absolutely critical that those who decide how to allocate government money understand the importance of public libraries. That they understand the role you play in making whole societies healthy, wealthy, and wise.

That is part of the reason we give the Access to Learning Award, to bring attention to the wonderful work you're doing.

I hope you'll keep bringing attention to yourselves. Because all of you can tell stories like Vasconcelos can. Nobody who hears those stories can deny their power.

I was particularly moved by the story of a woman who uses a Web camera to talk to her husband, who is in the United States earning money for his family. She says that, quote, "Vasconcelos helped my children know their father."

In keeping with the theme of showing how technology brings people closer together, I would like to extend a warm congratulations to the Vasconcelos staff in Veracruz who are watching this ceremony via video teleconference. To all of you, for all your hard work, I say: "Muchas gracias."

And with that, I'd like to present the Access to Learning Award to Governor Herrera. I would also ask that Victor Arredondo, creator of Vasconcelos and secretary of education for the state of Veracruz, and Mario Fernandez, general coordinator for the Vasconcelos Program, join the governor as Dr. Arredondo will present some remarks on the Vasconcelos Program.

Will you join me on stage, please?