



# Literary Agent



Book by book, **KYM PREWITT** hopes to turn a new page in the lives of disadvantaged children.

For Kym Prewitt, the visit to Glen Iris Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama, was a game changer. A former English teacher, she had stopped working to be a stay-at-home mom. But Kym missed being in the classroom—and the deep satisfaction that came from helping students realize their potential. So when Bill Porter, a friend who volunteered with a local literacy organization, invited her to sit in and observe a tutor teaching second-graders, she accepted. “It was heartbreaking seeing kids who were struggling to read

but so eager to learn,” recalls Kym, 48. “I cried all the way home.”

The tears subsided, but not her determination to help. Kym decided she wanted to create a nonprofit that would have a far greater impact than she could alone. “I invited over a dozen friends and described my day at Glen Iris,” she says. “I told them the group, Better Basics, was doing a wonderful job building reading skills. But it was having a hard time supplying enough books, both in the classroom and for kids to take home. If we could fill that gap, we’d

be doing something unique, effective and relevant.” Kym’s enthusiasm energized everyone in the room. “It was so clear when she laid out her plans that she had put her heart and soul into it,” says Beth Wilder, a close friend since their student days at Auburn University. “I was blown away, and I realized that this could be something huge.”

Within months the women had founded the nonprofit Children’s Literacy Guild of Alabama (CLG), with Kym as its unpaid executive director. “One of the first things we did was make a wish list of prominent people—politicians, business leaders, educators, athletes—we wanted for our advisory council, which would help give us credibility in the



**“What my mom does is important,” says Billy, with his parents and sister Addie.**

community,” she says. “Once we set that up, we were able to enlist scores of volunteers.” Members organized book drive competitions between rival schools, recorded audiobooks for kids learning English as a second language, and arranged donation drop-off locations.

Working in coordination with Better Basics, CLG delivered the books to schools. “I especially loved going to classrooms and helping out with their MORE program, which rewards fourth-graders for reading,” Kym says. “After a child finishes a book and completes a 10-question report, she earns a new one to take home. CLG provided the books—and they were often the first ones the children had ever owned.”

Strategic partnerships have been key to CLG’s success. In 2009 the group enlisted the Junior League of Birmingham as a cosponsor of its first citywide book drive. “They have so many members, allowing us to increase the number of books we could collect—we got 30,000 through the event—plus we were able to spread the word about our mission,” says Kym. CLG also hooked up with Huntingdon College in Montgomery, which agreed to store donated texts in classrooms so that educators from throughout central Alabama could come pick them up.

Fundraising, too, has been a

collaborative process. After Kym chatted with Lee Hurley, a friend in the publishing business, the pair came up with the idea of creating a coffee table book of literary quotes and children’s portraits. The pictures were solicited from photographers across the state, and the volume, *Precious Cargo: A Celebration of Alabama’s Children*, was sold at stores and church bazaars, through word of mouth and online. “The uncanny thing is how much money we can get without trying that hard once the awareness is there,” says Kym.

From the start, her family has been supportive. Kym’s husband, Johnny, 49, vice president of a family-owned insurance firm, made regular financial contributions as unexpected costs arose. In CLG’s early years, when the Prewitt home was the base of operations and boxes of books filled the garage, son Jack, now 19, got friends to help load them onto trucks. Daughter Addie, 17, started a literacy club at her high school last year that supports some of the same nonprofits as CLG, and Billy, 15, donated his own novels and textbooks.

Within a few years, the organization managed to exceed even Kym’s highest hopes. By 2010 CLG had collected enough money to create an endowment for Better Basics, ensuring a steady source of income to purchase texts and other supplies for its reading enrichment programs. The book drive has evolved into an annual event called Birmingham Reads, involving some 700 volunteer readers in more than 600 elementary school classrooms who give away 14,000 books: one to every K–5 student in the city’s elementary schools.

Today CLG exists as an endowment that supports Better Basics, where Kym is a board member. “She has a true talent—and passion—for service,” says Karen Kapp, the group’s executive director. “If you need a job done, she’s the one to call.” Kym considers herself blessed to be the go-to person in the fight against illiteracy. “I can’t think of anything more important. Helping children learn to read can change the trajectory of their lives,” she says. “What we’re giving them is a future.”