

Changing the world one word at a time

Jim Healey

In his well-known essay “Civil Disobedience” (1849), the nineteenth-century American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau makes a thought-provoking comment about the world in which he finds himself: “I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad.” Though Thoreau’s statement is concerned with effecting political change, making this world a better place to live in seems a secondary concern. But for many people, living in this world involves making it a better place to live in. Making a difference is part of who they are and what they do.

Volunteer translators and interpreters are making this a better world to live in, mainly by donating their time and language skills to organizations that are dedicated to improving lives. Global organizations such as the four profiled in this article – Kiva.org, Kidlink, International Children’s Digital Library and the American Red Cross Serving King & Kitsap Counties – depend upon volunteer translators and interpreters to fulfill their missions. The reasons why people volunteer their time and skills are many, but the result is the same – the world is a better place because of what they so generously do.

Kiva.org

Headquartered in San Francisco, California, Kiva.org – *kiva* being a Swahili word for *agreement* or *unity* – fights global poverty by making, as the organization’s slogan says, “loans that change lives.” Founded in 2004 by Jessica Flannery and Matthew Flannery, Kiva.org helps people “to connect with and make personal loans to low-income entrepreneurs in the developing world.” Loans can help a woman in Nicaragua operate a tailoring business (loan amount: \$200), a man in Ecuador open a shoe-making business (loan amount: \$600) and two women in Senegal begin a fish-selling operation (loan amount: \$1,000).



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Jordanian women oversee a child answering the four registration questions for Kidlink.

The word *loan* is repeated and emphasized throughout Kiva.org’s website (www.kiva.org). The money given to low-income entrepreneurs is not a donation, a handout or a contribution. According to the website, “a loan through Kiva.org is not a handout: it is a source of empowerment for both the giver and the recipient. Kiva.org users are not donors; they are lenders in ‘peer-to-peer’ microfinance, a process based on mutual respect and trust. Kiva.org lenders see exactly *who* their money goes to, *what* the recipients are doing with it, and *how* it is making a difference.”

Lenders can make loans of “as little as \$25 to the entrepreneur of their choice via PayPal, a globally recognized online payment service.” Loans through Kiva.org are administered by microfinance institutions (MFIs) – “organizations that give small loans that help poor people who wish to start or expand their small businesses but are too poor to qualify for traditional bank loans. Over 10,000 MFIs exist worldwide.” Once a loan is repaid, the lender has two options – either withdraw the money or re-loan the sum to another entrepreneur.

Naomi Baer, Kiva.org’s translation program manager, oversees 175 volunteer translators located in eight countries ranging from Cambodia to Iceland and in more than 15 US states. According to Baer, “volunteers translate and

review over 2,000 business profiles per month.” Kiva.org translates into English from six languages: Spanish, French, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Bahasa Indonesia and Russian. “We plan to provide language support to new partners in Khmer, Nepali, and Swahili soon,” Baer notes.

Translators come to Kiva.org to volunteer their professional skills for a variety of reasons. Leonardo Duran, a project manager for Foreign Translations, Inc., saw a short article about Kiva.org in an issue of *Outside* magazine. He was impressed with the concept of microfinance and saw the link on Kiva.org’s website for volunteer translators. He immediately sent in his résumé. According to Duran, “it was the perfect opportunity to combine my passion for languages and my interest in helping those in need.”

Olga Berg, a freelance conference interpreter and translator, saw Kiva.org’s post on the Monterey Institute of International Studies virtual board a year ago. She saw volunteering her translation skills as an opportunity for professional development. “Finance and banking are important subject areas for translators working in my language combination – English <> Russian – and I thought that my experience with Kiva.org would look good on my résumé,” says Berg.

Some translators come to Kiva.org first as lenders and then as volunteer translators. Kresna Hartandi, a financial analyst for cardiac surgery equipment maker Boston Scientific Corporation, signed up to become a Kiva.org lender after watching a feature about the organization on PBS television. Hartandi says that he was “intrigued with Kiva.org’s operational model that enabled ordinary people in the United States and elsewhere to make a difference in fighting poverty by financing micro-loans to entrepreneurs in Third World countries with just a PayPal account.” But after becoming a Kiva.org lender, Hartandi saw that the organization needed translators for Bahasa Indonesia, his native language. “What better way for me to help my fellow Indonesians from 8,000 miles away just by donating my time and skills,” adds Hartandi.

For Duran, who translates from Spanish, French and Portuguese for Kiva.org, his experience was the opposite of Hartandi’s. “I don’t have a lot of disposable income to give away, but I am glad to donate my time,” says Duran. “In fact, reading and translating all of these business descriptions inspired me to become a lender myself. I recently made my first two loans to Kiva.org businesses in Mozambique and Iraq.”

Céline Franco, a Lincoln, Nebraska-based freelance translator and interpreter, finds that volunteering with Kiva.org is “a great opportunity to work with highly skilled translators.” She adds, “Kiva.org is full of benefits. Any time I have a terminology question, I can find someone – usually someone who is bilingual – who specializes in whatever it is I am working on, and I can get my question answered accurately.” As a freelance translator like Franco, Toronto-based Berg feels that translating for Kiva.org gives her “an opportunity to join a professional community. This is particularly important for freelance translators who often feel isolated working mostly from home.”

Connecting to the larger world and making a genuine contribution are two of the many benefits that Kiva.org volunteer translators receive, according to Baer. “Many Kiva.org volunteers are excited about the concept of contributing in such a direct way to the success of micro-loans and micro-business in the developing world,” says Baer. “After translating a Kiva.org entrepreneur’s profile, which often includes information about his or her life and circumstances,

as well as business plans, seeing his or her photo, and then watching the business get funded by 20-plus Kiva.org lenders across the globe, there is a palpable sense of connection and contribution.”

The bottom line is that the volunteer translators themselves believe in Kiva.org and its mission. “Kiva.org is making it possible for anyone, even those with limited funds to spare, to help small entrepreneurs. I just love that,” notes Franco. Berg recognizes the role that Kiva.org can play in people’s lives: “I believe in Kiva.org’s mission and feel proud that I can contribute to this project and help people make positive changes in their lives.” And there are benefits on the personal level as well. For Hartandi, it is “the satisfaction that I am making a real contribution in helping to make the world a better place, just by doing simple ordinary things like translating.” Duran finds personal satisfaction in helping others by using his knowledge: “Personally, volunteering for Kiva.org makes me feel good about myself in that I am able to use my knowledge in a subject area I am passionate about to help those who have been less fortunate in life than me.”

Helping low-income entrepreneurs in developing countries is an investment in the present and the future, and Kiva.org’s volunteer translators play crucial roles in changing people’s lives – not only on the personal level, but also on the community and national levels. Without the volunteer translators, Kiva.org would not be able to fulfill its mission. As Baer observes, “as a nonprofit, Kiva.org could not translate high volumes of text without the help of its extensive volunteer translation team.”

Kidlink

“A place for kids to collaborate and network with friends around the world” is the slogan for Kidlink (www.kidlink.org), a nonprofit, non-governmental organization that encourages children to engage in a global dialog. Kidlink was founded in May 1990 by Odd de Presno (Norway), Nancy Stefanik (United States), Knut Braatane (Norway) and Jonn Ord (Canada) to help children “to understand themselves, their interests, dreams, and goals for life; to develop life skills, creativity and maturity; and to build social networks across cultures and borders.”

According to its website, Kidlink is available to children in two groups: “Students at school can participate through the secondary school level. Children and youth participating from home can participate through the age of 15.” Most of Kidlink’s users are between the ages of 10 and 15 years. Since its inception in 1990, children from 176 countries have used Kidlink. Its website includes private chat rooms, workshops, forums, profiles, projects and other activities.

The foundation of Kidlink is the four registration questions about life that all children must answer in order to access the site and its services: Who am I? What do I want to be when I grow up? How do I want the world to be better when I grow up? What can I do now to make this happen? A Kidlink registration team reviews and approves the responses that are then made public on a special “student home page” called a KidPage. The responses to the four questions help children to develop critical thinking skills; to write for an international audience; and to learn about children living in other countries and in different economic and political conditions.

Besides creating a portal for children throughout the world to communicate with one another, Kidlink also provides support to teachers. KidPages can be used in the classroom as an educational tool for learning: “To motivate learning, schools must help students



identify interests, dreams, and define personal goals. . . . Your students' KidPages are possibilities to meet interesting people. Give them time to rewrite their self-presentations for better clarity and completeness, add a photo of themselves, and art that they have created. In the process, the awareness of their own interests, dreams and goals will increase." Kidlink's site has workshops for teachers on how to use the four registration questions in the classroom; how to find connections between student responses and required curriculum; and how to manage the responses for students of different ages and abilities.

Odd de Presno, executive director of Kidlink, talks about the volunteer translation needs of the organization. "Almost all translation needs are *from* English into some language," says de Presno. "*Into some language* means that we want to make Kidlink available to children in any living language." The greatest need is for volunteer translators in the nearly 40 languages – from Slovak and Icelandic to Azeri and Tamil – already being served on the website because not all of Kidlink's services and activities are available in these languages.

The role of volunteer translators is twofold: "to share its services, resources and learning material with children, youth, teachers, parents, and others using your language. To strengthen your language and culture." According to de Presno, "24 new

translators signed up through Kidlink's website in 2007. In addition, some signed up as proofreaders." A good Kidlink translator, says de Presno, correctly uses the



destination language; uses words that are easily understood by Kidlink's primary audiences – students and teachers; and ensures that the translated content truly represents what is written in the source text. Also, the volunteer translator must be able to deliver the translations in .html. Kidlink's website provides such tools as "Workshop for Translators: Translating the Introduction to Kidlink" that give volunteer translators a step-by-step "hands on" training experience.

Not surprisingly, some of Kidlink's volunteer translators are teachers themselves. Marianna Schwartz lives and teaches in a primary school in Veröce, a village in the Danube Bend, not far from Budapest, Hungary. She began as a proofreader and practiced translating web pages. Schwartz now translates into Hungarian "registration

forms; some introduction Kidlink pages, for example, life-skills training; and the teachers' workshop on the four questions. I am translating what teachers need to know to make better use of their children's responses to the four questions in their teaching environment in order to help their students develop and grow." Schwartz also hopes that her volunteer work will encourage students and other teachers in her school to use Kidlink in the classroom: "I intend to show my students Kidlink's website, and, if they are interested, they could send in their registration forms. I also told two of my colleagues who teach English to visit the website because it is worth seeing."

Thy Nu Mai Tran has been living and studying in New York City for the past year. In Vietnam, Tran was a teacher of English as a foreign language on the high-school level before she won a scholarship to study in the Teachers' College at Columbia University, where she is working on her master's degree in international educational development. Tran sees her volunteer translation work for Kidlink as supporting "Vietnamese children without English competence and giving them a chance to make friends all over the world. I love to translate Kidlink so that it can become another 'kid home' for Vietnamese children. I believe that when they feel comfortable with their language, Vietnamese children will actively participate internationally on a site such as Kidlink. They can share their dreams and artwork with children throughout the world." When she returns to Vietnam in May 2008, Tran plans to share Kidlink with her students.

Based in Augusta, Georgia, Katerina Richardson uses her English-Russian language combination to translate the Kidlink website. A graduate from a teachers' training university, Richardson finds topics on education and teaching to be familiar territory. She came to Kidlink while searching on Google to volunteer her language skills. "I found several organizations, including Kidlink," says Richardson. "The other organization I translate for is the International Association of Inhabitants." She has been volunteering for Kidlink for nearly a year, and the main benefit is "the satisfaction one receives when he or she does good deeds. It is a way of giving back to society. Through volunteering I learn; I meet new people; and I acquire new experiences."

Part of the positive experience that volunteer translators have with Kidlink is working with de Presno. Volunteers

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appreciate his guidance and encouragement. Schwartz started with proofreading, but moved into translating at de Presno's urging. "The leaders of Kidlink do an excellent job of running the organization and website," Schwartz says, "for the sake of a good cause – to make our world better." Tran feels that her work for Kidlink is like working with family. "Translating for Kidlink is a joy. Every time I do a translation and am in contact with Mr. Odd de Presno, I feel I am in contact with an old friend," she observes. "I don't quite understand such a feeling, but I always feel a connection between me and Kidlink – the feeling that doing something for others is always meaningful."

International Children's Digital Library

A research project funded by the National Science Foundation, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and Microsoft, the International Children's Digital Library (ICDL) was introduced at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., in November 2002. Created in collaboration with the University of Maryland and the Internet Archive, ICDL has foundation goals in four key areas – collection, education, technology and business. According to ICDL's website (www.icdlbooks.org), the goal in the area of collection is "to create a collection of more than 10,000 books in at least 100 languages that is freely available to children, teachers, librarians, parents, and scholars through the world via the internet. The materials included in the collection reflect similarities and differences in cultures, societies, interests, lifestyles, and priorities of peoples around the world. The collection's focus is on identifying materials that help children to understand the world

around them and the global society in which they live. It is hoped that through a greater understanding of one another that tolerance and acceptance can be achieved."

More than one million people from 166 countries worldwide have visited ICDL's website. Most of the visitors come from the United States (50%), with South Africa (15%) and China (7%) as the next two countries having the most visitors. The ICDL collection currently includes over 2,400 books in 41 languages. The website notes that the collection has two primary audiences: "The first audience is children ages 3-13, as well as librarians, teachers, parents, and caregivers who work with children of these ages. The second audience is international scholars and researchers in the area of children's literature."

Most of the books in the ICDL collection are not translations. The collection primarily contains "books in their original, physically published form only. Occasionally we might have versions of books available in several languages because the books have been physically published by companies in these languages." Tim Browne, executive director, says that ICDL has recently begun to translate public domain books – "books for which the copyright has expired. Because we are still in the development stage of this project, it may be several months before the complete book translations appear online." E-books are not included in the collection at this time.

Browne welcomes volunteer translators of all languages. "850 translators have signed up to help ICDL," says Browne. "Of those, 317 translators working with 44 languages – some not represented by books in ICDL – have completed a translation assignment." Volunteer translators use their professional skills

to translate the ICDL web interface, bibliographic information about the books (book title, abstract, author biography, publishing information and so on), and other documents into various languages. ICDL is especially in need of translators working with such languages as Arabic, Hebrew, Mongolian, Danish and Tongan. The website contains a complete list of the languages in demand.

Browne explains what happens after a translator signs up on the ICDL website to be a volunteer. "A member of the ICDL teams assigns the translator a metadata translation – for example, book title, abstract and so on – and then the translator completes the assignment by filling out a form online," Browne notes. "In addition to translating metadata, volunteers may also be asked to help translate the library interface or entire books." Ideally, ICDL would like to have the resources to translate the metadata of each book in its collection into every single language.

Newly retired first-grade teacher Monique Palomares knows only too well the importance of reading skills and contact with other cultures for children. This, along with her love of languages, is why she became a volunteer translator for ICDL. "I know how important it is for kids to be in contact with books and literature from their own culture and from other cultures – theirs so that they know where

they belong and other cultures so that they can see there are different places, different people, different ways to live, to think, to see the world, and different ways to write," says Palomares. Based in Montpellier, France, she also donates her free time to giving literacy lessons a couple of times a week to Turkish and Moroccan women and to translating children's songs and nursery rhymes on another website.

The love of reading brought Ayari Rodriguez, a veterinary student at the Universidad Nacional Pedro Henríquez Ureña in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, to volunteer English > Spanish skills to ICDL. "I love the internet," Rodriguez says, "and to Google things around. I found ICDL while looking for some children's books for my nephews. I looked around the website and thought it was a great idea. Then I found out that I could help. I've always thought that reading is an essential part of my life, and that if I could help others to read a book because I translated it, it's a great feeling." Besides translating the metadata for 30 books, Rodriguez has translated several books: "Books are very challenging, especially when I have to translate riddle books where rhyming is very important."

Diana Silva, a tourism student and tutor in Vila Nova de Gais, near Oporto,

Portugal, came to ICDL because she likes "to work with children, and it is important for them to learn stories from other countries." Her last two ICDL assignments gave her an opportunity to renew her acquaintance with the "two best stories" of her life – *Sleeping Beauty* and *Puss in Boots*.

The personal rewards for the volunteer translators are many. Besides loving the way some people illustrate books – *Plaisir des yeux!* she says

– Palomares enjoys the personal relationships she has with the ICDL staff, the little touches "that make life so nicer even if you never did and/or never will meet them." Silva also feels at home and welcomed through her volunteerism with ICDL. "The people at ICDL are polite and friendly," she says. "I feel that I am making a difference when they thank me. I am part of a family that couldn't be so strong without me and the translation work that I do." Rodriguez's rewards are "100% personal": "I'm hopeful that people will read the metadata that I translate and find it interesting enough to choose that book to read."

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American Red Cross Serving King & Kitsap Counties

The International Red Cross – through its national and local chapters – is known worldwide for providing relief to victims of disasters and for helping people prevent, prepare for and respond to emergencies. The 800 local chapters of the American Red Cross (ARC) help the organization to fulfill its mission. Both founded in 1925, the Seattle-King County Chapter and the Kitsap Chapter have merged to more efficiently provide services – disaster assistance, safety classes, emergency kits, disaster education, workplace preparedness and so on – to the local communities within the counties.

Among the many services are language interpretation and translation. According to its website (www.seattleredcross.org), the Red Cross Language Bank "provides telephone and in-person interpretation as well as translation of short documents" such as flyers. Unlike many other organizations that use volunteer translators and interpreters throughout the world, mainly doing their work online, ARC Serving King & Kitsap Counties uses volunteers living in the community in which their translating and interpreting skills are needed. These volunteers can

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Karen Wirkala, international services specialist in the Seattle office, says, "We currently have about 400 volunteer interpreters and translators." Approximately 75 languages are represented. Spanish, Somali, Vietnamese, Chinese and Russian are the top-requested languages, and volunteers are always being recruited for these. "We also have some languages that are not as frequently requested – such as Amharic and Oromo – but we have very few or no volunteers for them," notes Wirkala. "So, we are actively recruiting volunteers for those. We also try to stay on top of the latest refugee and immigrant groups being resettled in our area. In this way, we know how to direct our outreach efforts. One of the main refugee groups whom we are currently concerned with is the 1,972 Burundians. The state of Washington receives the fourth highest number of refugees in the United States." In 2006-2007, the ARC Serving King & Kitsap Counties "translated documents and provided language interpretation services for 4,205 people," according to its website.

All ARC Language Bank volunteers must attend a four-hour training course covering the basic skills and ethics of interpreting and translating. As the website states, "our volunteer interpreters and translators do not necessarily carry certifications; most are bilingual individuals with a desire to help others in the community." Wirkala adds, "Our volunteers are not required to have any interpreting or translating experience. The main quality is reliability. When a volunteer takes a case, he or she must follow through and interpret in the manner in which he or she was instructed at our training course." Also, volunteers must be cleared through a Washington State Patrol background check.

Wirkala adds an interesting sidenote about the ARC Language Bank: "We are quite unique in the Red Cross. I believe that we are the only ARC chapter that has a Language Bank – certainly the only one of this magnitude. So, it's not something that is common in the Red Cross, rather it was started and had evolved here."

Jennifer Hodgdon, a freelance web software developer, wanted a volunteer job that would help keep her Spanish language skills up to date. She found out about the ARC Language Bank, and, according to Hodgdon, "it seems like a good fit for my level of Spanish skills, something interesting to do,



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and it also has a flexible schedule.” Most of her volunteerism is interpreting between a case worker and a client. “Early Head Start cases are fun,” she says. “I help parents and caseworkers discuss child development for an hour or more.”

Hodgdon also does phone interpreting in addition to live interpreting. Without nonverbal clues such as body language or facial expressions, phone interpreting can be challenging. Also, the phone connection sometimes is not good because of three-way conferencing and cell phones. “Traditional housing program cases, for example, tend to be on the phone,” says Hodgdon. “We discuss issues such as applications for permanent housing, visa applications, and other services a client might need. Sometimes very sensitive topics come up, such as questions about the client’s history of domestic violence, which can be very difficult for all parties.”

Having moved to the Seattle area in the past year, Maria Alejandra Gómez began looking for an opportunity to volunteer helping people. Through a cousin who was working at ARC, she became aware of the need for bilingual volunteers and decided to join the Language Bank. Gómez has helped “with individual cases supporting people in their day-to-day living situations like making medical appointments, looking for additional information at their children’s schools, helping clients understand documents they have to fill out, and

referring them and their family members to important services.” She has also helped in editing and translating documents for agencies and individuals. Another area where Gómez has used her language skills is in Community Disaster Education, training Hispanic communities on how to be prepared for any kind of disaster in the Seattle area.

Gómez’s work with ARC has helped her to decide “what road to take for my future work.” She is currently working on her master’s degree in public administration at Seattle University. Given her busy school schedule, she feels that “an advantage we have as volunteers is that we can choose the best time to be involved.”

A bookkeeper for a paint company and a future student at the University of Washington, Vlada Edwards became involved with the ARC through an environmental science class she was taking at Seattle Central Community College where students needed to do some service learning. She talked to her teacher about helping people to get out of poverty through volunteering as a translator/interpreter. Edwards knew that the ARC had a great reputation for helping people in need. She also had a personal reason for joining the Language Bank. Edwards remembers that “in the 1990s the ARC helped many Russian retirees, including my own grandmother, by providing them with much-needed food.”

Edwards has helped on a number of ARC projects since beginning volunteering in March 2007, including interpreting for pregnant women and women with small children involved in transitional housing. “I was helping to communicate house rules to one Russian-speaking woman,” says Edwards, “and also interpreted the conversation between this woman and her house manager. This meeting was important for both of them because the pregnant woman was working toward bettering her life – finding permanent housing, getting set up for childbirth, and finding a doctor. The manager was able to see if this woman had everything she needed and that her life in the transitional house was satisfying.”

“The biggest reward is knowing that we can support people in situations where language barriers complicate their lives,” says Gómez. Edwards feels the same way about her volunteering: “I love helping people and knowing that because of what I do their lives can be changed for the better.” Hodgdon also finds “connecting clients with valuable community services” to be important.

Conclusion

The translators and interpreters profiled in this article are glad to be making the world “a good place to live in.” They and thousands of other volunteers are changing the world one life at a time by removing language barriers and providing services to those in need. **M**



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