

Writing So Others May Read:

A Newspaperman's Fight Against Illiteracy

If you can read this, consider yourself fortunate. Because, as Jerry Bellune was shocked to discover, there are 42 million of us in America who can't. It was this startling revelation that led him to what he views as his life's Great Purpose: to raise enough money to assist agencies trying to make a dent in that 42 million.

It would seem to some that at 73 Bellune has certainly accomplished enough to call it a day. He's a successful, world-traveled journalist, sought-after public speaker, and founder of the award-winning *Lexington County Chronicle*. But a year ago, that little voice inside his head began nagging him: There was something more to be done in this life.

"I awoke early one morning, could not go back to sleep and lay there in the dark, listening to my wife's breathing," Bellune said. "Suddenly into my mind came Jimmy, a young man in his late teens who had worked with us at our press plant near the Columbia Metropolitan Airport. He worked hard, showed up on time, stayed until the work was done no matter how late. He and our son David became friends. One day David discovered Jimmy could not read. He was helping print newspapers that he couldn't read. Wow!"

It is difficult to imagine how, in the 21st Century, anyone can navigate his or her way through life without the ability to read. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine in any century.

"To a lot of them, it is their Dark Secret," Bellune said. "They don't want anyone to know they can't read. And I don't blame them. I've traveled enough to foreign countries where I can't read the native language. I know what a handicap that can be. Research shows that illiterates go to great lengths to hide it. They can read stop signs, but many

drive without licenses because they can't get one. They can read 'Men' and 'Women' or follow the stick figure outlines on restroom doors, but they can't read a menu. In a restaurant they will ask a waiter to recommend something, or order what a companion orders."

Before Bellune could possibly help Jimmy, the young man had disappeared.

"We never saw Jimmy again," he said. "His mother told us Jimmy came home, packed a bag, kissed her goodbye and said he would let her know where he was when he got there. What a tragedy, I thought. We could have helped Jimmy get remedial training and learn to read. But he was gone. Then a voice inside my head said, 'Well, smart guy, what are you going to do about the other Jimmys who can't read?' "

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-Jerry Bellune

Early morning computer research revealed the depth of the problem: 42 million illiterates in America, with a million more joining those ranks every year. "Here in the greatest democracy on earth, with free public education, 42 million of us have slipped through the cracks," Bellune marveled. "I decided the best strategy for me was not to try to invent a new literacy program, but to help fund existing ones. They are already making a difference. I just needed to find which ones had the best track record and raise money for them."

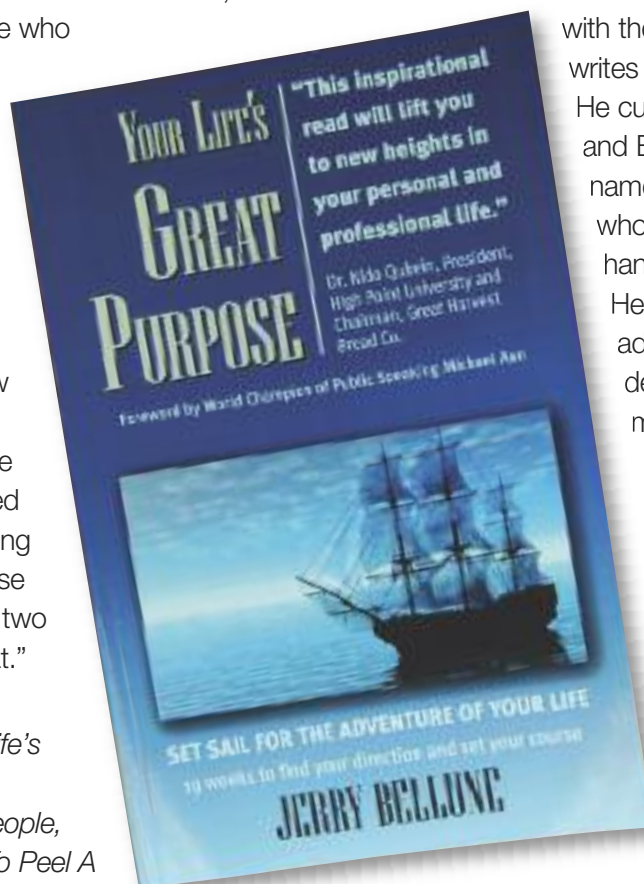
Recognizing literacy coaches were abundant, Bellune — a Greenville native who worked at newspapers in the Northeast before settling in Lexington — decided to do what he already knew how to do: raise money. “I’ve raised thousands of dollars for homeless families, cancer patients, you name it. I know how and who to ask for money. I also decided to give \$10 of every book I published and sold and half my speaking fees. My goal became to raise \$20 million. I just had to sell two million books. I could do that.”

And with self-published inspirational titles like *Your Life’s Great Purpose*, and sound business works like *Lead People, Manage Things*, and *How To Peel A Green Banana*, two million books would seem like a cinch; and \$20 million would seem like a lot of money.

Then Bellune did the math: 42 million Americans, \$20 million – less than 50 cents per person. Not enough. Inspired then by Jack Canfield, author of *Chicken Soup For The Soul*, Bellune decided to up the ante to a cool \$200 million. And he figures to do it in 10 years.

So far, Bellune says he’s sold 2,000 copies of *Your Life’s Great Purpose*, and close to 2,000 copies of *Lead People, Manage Things*. A good start, but, he admits, there’s still a long way to go.

Self-publishing has helped Bellune reap more per book sale, but it also has limited his distribution power. It’s a trade-off, and one he may have to address if he is to meet his 10-year goal. And while his speaking engagements have taken him all over the U.S. as well as to countries overseas, addressing business groups and newspaper associations, the current economy has taken a bite out of his frequent flier miles.



Nevertheless, Bellune is charged with the kind of energetic purpose he writes about in many of his books. He currently is organizing the Marion and Eddie Bellune Foundation, named for his parents — both of whom were great readers — to handle distribution of the money. He also is researching the myriad adult literacy organizations to determine which could do the most with all that money.

And, as always, there are more books on the horizon. *Your Life’s Great Purpose* is a compilation of his weekly Success Strategies newsletters, and he is at work on the sequel *The Music Inside You*. There’s also a sequel to *Lead People, Manage Things* in the works. Like its

predecessor, it’s a compilation of his monthly Leadership columns, tentatively titled *WE to the 100th Power*. “WE” emphasizes Bellune’s belief in teamwork and pays homage to Charles Lindbergh’s book of the same name. “WE” was Lindbergh and his plane.

“I accept that God has given me a gift,” Bellune said. “Ten years more of life on Earth to accomplish all this. I thank Him every day for this gift.”

Call it a gift, or call it a challenge, Bellune appears to have embraced it fully. ●

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Columbia freelance writer James Denton covered Upstate leaf-peeping in the autumn 2009 **Sandlapper**.

Photographer Becky Hyatt Rickenbaker lives in Lexington.

To learn more about Jerry Bellune’s literacy campaign, visit jerrybellune.com.