The gift of reading

The Revolving Library (TRL) is the brainchild of Vannitha Balasingam, a former sub-editor who has taken time off to focus on her other passion — playing Scrabble. She has competed in national and international tournaments over the years, and is currently training for the 2013 World Scrabble Championship.

"It all started when I wanted to get rid of some of my stuff," says Vannitha, with a laugh. "I am a real pack rat and find it extremely hard to get rid of my things. But I was moving and had no choice. I started a second-hand soul on Facebook and decided to donate 10% of my sales to charity. I quickly realised that 10% from sales of second-hand items wasn’t going to add up to much, and decided to do the same for books which I could donate to children’s homes," Vannitha, 40, explains. Her simple idea quickly grew into something larger.

"Pretty soon, friends started asking me if I could sell their second-hand items on my online souk. I agreed on condition that they give 10% of their sales for my project. Before I knew it, I had enough to buy a small collection of books — enough to get things going," she shares. As she was sorting out her books and planning her first "drop off," Vannitha had another light bulb moment.

"I thought that if a book could be read by all the kids in one orphanage, and then passed on to another home and be read by all the kids in that home, too, well, that one book would really go a long way. That was how the idea for TRL came about," she says.

On hindsight, Vannitha says she was thinking of what she called "collaborative consumption" which she had read about online some time back. The overarching idea behind the movement and also TRL was simple: the more you share, the more you have.

"I don’t really know where this movement originated, but it is widely practised in America and Australia. It was born during tough economic times many years ago when people, instead of buying new things, decided to sharing or renting out their stuff. And instead of buying new things, they would buy second-hand stuff. That is where I was at that time," she shares, adding that each home gets between 50 and 100 books.

Vannitha created a Facebook page for TRL as she wanted to reach out to friends for contacts of homes and orphanages that may need books.

The children in homes would not be able to benefit from the project because of their low literacy level. Besides, many homes had large libraries that were full of books which were not age-appropriate. These books were just sitting on the shelves, collecting dust.

"Apart from setting up the reading corner and library, we had a reading session with the children and did some craft activities and played some games," recalls Vannitha.

Since its inception in March last year, TRL has grown into a core team of six, with another 26 volunteers; they call themselves the Revolvers. At the heart of TRL is a reading programme to help raise the literacy level of children in orphanages.

"The challenge is to find volunteers who are willing to commit. TRL is only as big as the number of people we have and the amount of time they can spend on the project. Right now we have six members in the core team, three who run literacy programmes, six active volunteers and 20 who volunteer when they can," she says.

Word got around and companies and organisations have stepped forward to donate resources or funds to TRL for the group to expand its reach. "We were approached by Magta Prima Bhd after our third instalment. They offered us financial assistance for our next installation which enabled us to create a "discovery nook" rather than just a reading corner. We bought a lot of educational toys for the children along with the books we had collected," she shares proudly.

Other contributions started coming in, too. Some donated paint and supplies for the libraries, while others donated more books.

It has been a rewarding experience for Aparna Thhey, a Revolver who volunteers time with TRL's reading programmes.

"Through our reading programme, these children learn grammar and language in context. It's not boring or dry and they really enjoy it. I started off thinking that I was helping these children but I must say being a part of this has taught me some life lessons, too. It has really been enriching," says Thhey, who now reads to the children in several orphanages.