

THINGS TO DO > BOOKS

## Q&A: Books For Africa founder Tom Warth marks 60-million milestone

The St. Paul nonprofit is the largest shipper of donated books to the African continent



Tom Warth, founder of the nonprofit Books for Africa tells a story at his Marine on St. Croix office on Tuesday, April 2, 2024. He said students he visited in Africa knew how to read from learning on a chalkboard but didn't know how to hold a book because they had never seen one. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)





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Tom Warth once visited a school library in Jinja, Uganda, that had nearly everything a library needs — except books.

There was a librarian, a card catalog, tables, bookcases and students, but the shelves were nearly bare. What few books there were, he said, were “tattered and worn.”

Warth took it upon himself to fill the library with books — and then did the same for hundreds of other libraries across the continent.

On Wednesday, the nonprofit organization that Warth founded, Books For Africa, shipped its 60 millionth book to Africa. A truckload of books left the Books For Africa warehouse in Marietta, Ga., bound for the harbor in Savannah, Ga., where they will be placed on a container ship bound for Ghana.

Books For Africa, based in St. Paul, is the largest shipper of donated text and library books to the African continent, having shipped books to all 55 countries in Africa since 1988



Matilda Arhin, a Books For Africa board member, on Wednesday, April 3, 2024, held a copy of the 60 millionth book shipped by the nonprofit organization in Marietta, Ga. Arhin served as container captain for the shipment. (Courtesy of Books For Africa)

Warth, a native of England, founded the organization after he sold his publishing company, Motorbooks International. “I wanted to invest the money where it would make a difference,” he said. “Education is essential to Africa’s development and to the future of its students.”

Warth, 88, of Marine on St. Croix, celebrated his 70th birthday by climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania as a fundraiser for Books For Africa. He trained for the climb to the mountain’s peak, 19,340 feet above sea level, by climbing the Main Street Stairs in downtown Stillwater 110 times, the equivalent of ascending the mountain.

When he turned 80, he decided to walk across the island of Zanzibar for yet another fundraiser. He also has walked across Gambia in West Africa; from Lake Michigan to South Dakota; from Canada to Iowa; and [from Menomonie, Wis., to St. Paul](#) and from Taylors Falls to the Capitol in St. Paul – all to raise both visibility and funds for Books For Africa.

“Without Tom, none of this would have happened,” said Patrick Plonski, the organization’s executive director. “Sixty million books have been shipped — and every single one of the African countries on the continent served — and it’s all been run out of this base here in Minnesota. All of this would have been unthinkable 36 years ago. It just shows the value of vision, and the ‘art of the possible.’”

To put that number into perspective, there are approximately 150,000 books at George Latimer Central Library in downtown St. Paul.

Last year, Books For Africa shipped 4,029,000 books, valued at more than \$32.6 million, to 32 African countries — the most books ever shipped in a single year. About 800,000 digital books also were shipped on 116 computers and 150 tablets. More than \$2.6 million was raised to ship the books to partners across Africa, Plonski said.

Warth, the owner of T. E. Warth Esq. Automotive Books, works out of an office above the Marine General Store in downtown Marine on St. Croix. He sells rare books to car enthusiasts.

Warth has two children and two grandchildren. He is married to Zantha LaFon Warth.

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In an interview with the Pioneer Press over lunch at the Brookside Bar & Grill in Marine, Warth talked about Books For Africa's recent milestone, a new children's book called "The Book King: The Story of Tom Warth and Books For Africa," and his love of hitchhiking. The transcript is edited for clarity and conciseness.

## **Tom Warth Q&A**

**Q:** Congratulations on reaching 60 million. To what do you attribute Books For Africa's success?

**A:** There are three reasons. Number one, books. Nobody likes to throw away a book, so we get given books. Number two, we started it in a philanthropic center of the country. Minnesota is known for philanthropy. I don't think if we'd started in Baltimore or Washington, it would have worked. And third, we've had two great executive directors. You know, the first one, Bob Kowalczyk, didn't mind packing the books and doing grunt work. And (Plonski) loves to network. You know, that's the secret. I mean he has really made it fly.

**Q:** Talk about the importance of books, particularly printed books.

**A:** You know, we were talking about newspapers, and the tactile feel and the sniff of a newspaper and holding it out and how looking at it is so much nicer than looking at something online, and then I think of the children in Africa, we can't abandon printed books. You know, half the population of Africa lives in rural areas. There are 400 million children. They live in huts with no printed material. Surely they need one printed book that they can touch and feel.

**Q:** Tell me about your childhood. Where did you go to school?

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Tom Warth, a native of England, with his portrait of British prime minister Winston Churchill. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

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**A:** I grew up near Cambridge (England). I went to boarding school, and then I went to Cambridgeshire Technical College for a year. That's like an American vo-tech. I learned basic things like typing, law, statistics, accounting, you know, a little about a lot, and that served me well the rest of my life. In fact, I got irritated at Motorbooks when they said in their advertisements for employees that they need to have a college degree. I said, "Well, I'm running the show, and I don't have a college degree."

**Q:** What brought you to the U.S.?

**A:** I lived in Eau Claire when I emigrated in 1960. I came to Eau Claire because that's where my sponsor, an Eighth Air Force pilot who had befriended my dad (during World War II) lived. He came to visit my dad in 1959, and we met, and he said to me, "Tom, if you want to see America, I'll sponsor you." You know, no one was immigrating in those days. I just thought, "Well, I'd like to see America." I came over and worked in a drugstore and on road construction. I stayed for about a year. Then I went back and got married, and then we decided to come to America, so we both came. America was the land of opportunity.

**Q:** Tell me about your interest in cars. How did that come about?

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**A:** My dad (Ewart) liked fine cars. He had a Bentley, and he would reverse it into the parking space, so people would know what he had. My brother, John, and I were infected by that. John was two years younger. He ended up being a major dealer in cars. He would go to India and spend a year there trying to get into the good graces of the maharajas and so on, who had garages full of Rolls-Royces. Sadly, he died in 1986. He was 48.

**Q:** How did you get into car book publishing?

**A:** We lived in Minneapolis, and I worked for Prudential Insurance for five years, but my ambition was always to work for myself, not have a boss. I didn't intend to have a big company or anything, but, with cars being my hobby, I started to think about getting material for (car) enthusiasts. I knew the car magazines, and so I put little ads in magazines like Road & Track, and



Tom Warth's business sign at his office above the Marine General Store. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

gradually it got bigger and bigger. I was the first, and the hobby was small. Back then in the 60s, people didn't have enough money to buy a lot of old cars. I threaded the needle in terms of timing. If I'd started it earlier, there wouldn't have been enough business. If I'd started it later, other people would have been in it. We were publishing 100 books a year when I sold out in 1988.

**Q:** Have you always liked driving?

**A:** Yes. Oh, I love driving. I like seeing the scenery and stuff. We just drove to Savannah and stayed for 10 days in an Airbnb and that was 3,000 miles I put on. I'm still lucky enough to have my wits about me. I can still drive, you know? My eyesight is good, and my reaction times are good. I like walking better than driving, though. I walk three to four miles a day.

**Q:** How many cars do you have?

**A:** I have a 1960 gray Citroën 2-CV — or Deux Chevaux. I had a 1965 289-AC Cobra, which I had for many years and sold, and I've got a 2003 Jaguar. The everyday car is a Fiat 500.

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Tom Warth stands among books, boxes of books and assorted memorabilia at his office in Marine on St. Croix. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

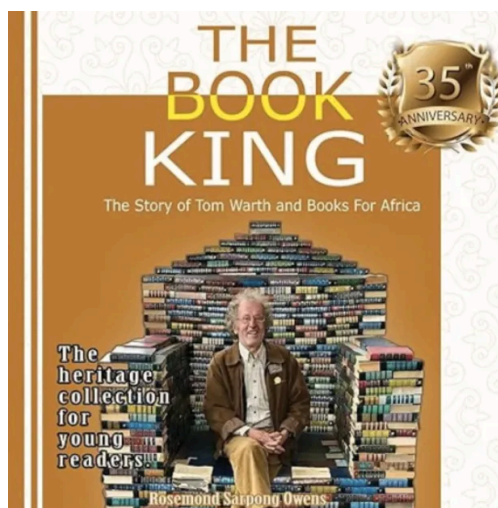
**A:** We were living in South Minneapolis, and a friend showed me a house on Judd Street that had English characteristics, and so we bought that in 1975. I've been here ever since. I'm in my third house here now. ... We looked around within a 20-mile radius for the business. It was a banker in Osceola (Wis.) who convinced me that an industrial park in Osceola would be a good spot for Motorworks.

**Q:** I understand a children's book called "The Book King" has just been published about you.

**A:** People have said, "Tom, you've had such an interesting life. You should write your autobiography." Well, now it's been done. Rosemond Sarpong Owens wrote it, and she did a fabulous job. It's a nice outline of my life.

**Q:** Let's talk about your love of hitchhiking.

**A:** People say it's dangerous, but I think it's less dangerous now than it was in the '50s and '60s, because there's supposed to be less crime. I think the



Author Rosemond Sarpong Owens in 2023 wrote a children's book about Books For Africa Founder Tom Warth called "The Book King: The Story of Tom Warth and Books For Africa." (Courtesy of Books For Africa)

In the 1950s, I hitchhiked around Europe. In 1961, I hitchhiked from Eau Claire to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras. Just south of Chicago, a lady picked me up, and she said, "What part of the South are you from?" I said, "I'm not from the South. I'm from England." She'd mistaken the Union Jack on my backpack for a Confederate flag. I also hitchhiked from Eau Claire to Winnipeg to buy a car. In Cuba, when I was last there, they fine drivers who passed a hitchhiker and had an empty seat and didn't pick them up.

I just think environmentally, we have to think about all these cars, four-seat cars with one person in them. I've picked up hitchhikers a lot, and I like it, you know, if you're on a long drive.

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