LOS ANGELES – Russell Westbrook, who plays pro basketball for the Oklahoma Thunder, returned Friday to 75th Street Elementary Community School where he dedicated a new wing of the library, filled with books he donated.

“Russell’s Reading Room” is a corner of the library lined with 1,400 new books and featuring murals, one while he played basketball as a UCLA Bruin. There, the NBA All-Star read to about 25 students from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade, and talked to them about the importance of becoming independent readers.

“This will be a place for students to fall in love with books, strengthen their reading skills and build their vocabulary,” Miguel Campa, the school principal said. “Putting books in children’s hands opens the world to them, provides opportunities to ensure equity and empowers with the four essential 21st Century skills: creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and communication.

“We believe that with a book in your hands, your imagination can take off.

The “reading oasis” was funded by donations form Westbrook’s Why Not? Foundation, and by Scholastic Corp., a book publisher. Westbrook has opened reading rooms in the Oklahoma City area, demonstrating his passion for putting books in children’s hands.

For Westbrook, the day was a homecoming. He attended the South Los Angeles school from third through fifth grades. One of his former teachers, Maria Vazquez, is now the school’s assistant principal. Two former classmates are now part of the 75th Street Elementary faculty – Maria Ramirez as a fourth-grade teacher and David Walton as a kindergarten aide.

In a published interview, Westbrook described his commitment for education. “I believe education is the simplest and most direct path towards a better life,” he said.

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