



Jane Kinney Meyers

A special librarian with a special mission: the Lubuto Library project.



Jane K. Meyers is the Executive Director of the Lubuto Library project, incorporated as a Non Profit Organisation on January 24, 2005. She lived in Malawi and Zambia for many years. Five years ago circumstances led her to open a makeshift library at the Fountain of Hope shelter for street children affected by AIDS, in Lusaka, Zambia. The impact was so great that it changed her life: "I felt it was my responsibility to make more libraries available for kids. That is the Lubuto Library Project." Jane Meyers talks about her experience and what she is looking to achieve during the pilot year of the project.

Library Link: What is your background as a librarian?

Jane Meyers: I have a special librarian background. Not a children librarian, not a public librarian. I didn't even belong to the ALA until one week ago, but I've always been involved with the Special Libraries Association. This project is far from the typical things that business librarians or government corporate librarians do or the kind of librarian I was. Throughout my career I worked with agricultural scientists, policy makers, I worked in international development with particular specialty in agriculture and so it seems very funny to my colleagues that I'm suddenly coming back and thinking about children's books. But what I realised is that developing a project like this has a very targeted audience, there's a very well defined audience, the first task is defining who they are and what information they need and then coming up with something to meet that need. That couldn't be more what a special librarian does.

What is the specific need for your project?

What I found is that these kids just wanted to learn about the world just like everyone else. They are out of school so the only possibility of learning for them

is to grab what's in front of them. To give them a collection of books that could teach them about the world was just a life line.



People talk about what's relevant in Africa with children and people often talk about fiction but we take so for granted the knowledge of the world that we've learnt because we've been able to go to school. Who remembers a time in their lives when they didn't know the dinosaurs existed? And when you meet a seventeen year-old who didn't know dinosaurs existed it's really amazing.

Prototype model of the Lubuto Library

Were you surprised by the overwhelmingly positive reactions of the children when the Fountain of Hope library first opened?

Absolutely! By virtue of its inherent value the library has kept kids coming and coming and coming and treasuring the books. The older kids are teaching the younger ones to take care of the books and make sure that they stay available for everyone else. I can't think of any other parallel in international development in any other thing.

Could libraries or schools donate books for the Lubuto Library Project?

I guess so but it would have to happen at some point when the Lubuto Project is operative and the libraries have been built. In the future I will work towards creating mechanisms that will allow book donations maybe to come directly from the UK. We have to get the project established first for that to be the case. The other thing we're trying to establish here is to elicit donations.

Then the books need to be selected and organised. With your average sort of book drive, without any information upfront, I would guess maybe only 10% of books donated would really be appropriate. We're trying very much to avoid that by educating book donors about the children we are targeting and their needs. We have developed a "collection development policy", guidelines for selecting the books.

We actually have a wonderful expert in children's literature who developed this policy with us.

How do you build your collection of books?

After the books are selected high-school volunteers organise them according to a very simple shelf classification. Books won't be catalogued because if a book goes missing it won't be replaced so it's not necessary. We're using a bookstore approach as a classification by subject areas.

With fiction, when people ask, my recommendations are to stick to the classics. Just really good powerful simple stories transcend cultures.

Now we have several thousand books that are not appropriate and we're trying to figure out what we're going to do with those books. So we might have a "used books" sale to raise funds for the project.

How many people currently work with you on the project?

We have a staff of three people in Zambia who are absolutely wonderful. Two librarians (Professor Maurice Lundu, Consultant Librarian and Matildah Sakala, Consultant Librarian) and an architect (Eleni Coromvli, Field Director) who designed the most wonderful buildings for the library in the traditional style. But I need to pay them a salary. We do need to raise some money. We should have a lot of that basic stuff - necessary to become a tax-exempt organization, so that we can solicit donations - done by September and then have a big fundraiser in the fall.



Inside the Lubuto library: prototype model

Will you be going back to Zambia to supervise the project?

We have established an office in Zambia that's an official NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation). For now I have to rely on my trust and their knowledge of what they're doing. I will have to travel to the field at some point. Our objective for the first year is to build three libraries on three different sites in Zambia. Eleni is doing some work with the government to try to identify where the government would like to have these libraries situated. We'll probably fund the construction of those libraries by funds obtained locally through grants from organisations that are providing funds to non-profit organisations in the field since it's very difficult for donors to find local NGOs that have the capacity to deal with a grant.

I wouldn't be able to go to the field for an extended period of time but I have planned to go at least once a year. After our pilot year we are planning to go to other countries in the region and so we've already been laying the ground work for Malawi, for example.

What are you working on now?

These days, instead of getting to read to kids I spend a lot of time trying to contact people who might lead me to where I could find funding for the project.

We're also making a film right now to use with the schools. Lubuto Libraries will originally be stocked by books we get by donations, mainly from schools here in the US and also in Canada. The double purpose of that is to raise awareness here how AIDS is affecting children in Africa. And the idea behind this is what you need to learn in order to make an intelligent choice about what kinds of books would be appropriate; the whole process of thinking and talking about who these kids are, why they are where they are, what they need and what kind of book you could send yourself that would help.

Last school year I worked with a middle school on this. We had assemblies and they did a book drive and we did a film. These 9 kids (7th graders) who did the film became little experts in the street kids of Zambia. At the end they had an assembly and they were able to say "now we need this kind of book" or "your paperbacks are not very useful, they have to be sturdy" or "we don't want your Disney books cause that's not very useful," "kids would like to see practical things, and science, etc."

What are the plans for the future?

A big thing that we would like to do is to have people come and talk, record their stories. With this generation a lot of African culture is dying. For a society based on oral tradition, to have generations of parents die out without transmitting their culture to their children gives people a very strong sense of their culture dying.

The kids will transcribe the stories and make them into books. Also in that process we'll see what kind of books can be made. We'd like to work with local publishers to see if we can get them published inexpensively.

The other thing is that there are very few books in print in local languages, in Zambia, in Malawi...

South Africa is the one country in that region that I don't expect to go to because they don't need me. They have lots of librarians who are interested in providing services to vulnerable children and capable of doing it.

You have extensive experience of working in Africa. I believe you introduced the phrase “information-isolated areas” 10 years ago in reference to Sub-Saharan countries. What is the situation like now?

Before the Internet there was simply no communication.

People here ask me “certainly you are going to put computer in these libraries.” My answer definitely has to be “when that’s appropriate.” You have to start on an appropriate level and how can you use a computer if you’ve barely been able to see a printed word.

Some things have gone even worse in Africa because of that. There are even greater divides.

How did people in Africa react to the project?

There isn’t an African anywhere that I’ve mentioned this to who hasn’t been immediately interested in this project. They very much recognise the value of education. I met with the Zambian ambassador of the United States who’s worked with UNICEF for years and has been very much involved with children and she likes the project very much.

One of the very lucky thing about the situation I was in whilst living in Zambia, because of my husband’s position (working with the IMF, International Monetary Fund), is that I was able to meet some of these really outstanding people and I just never experienced talking with anybody who wasn’t interested in doing something practical specifically related to books and publishing and libraries. I think because no one does that. Everyone talks about medicine and that sort of thing and people seem so surprised and immediately react positively.

It must be immensely rewarding for you to have achieved so much?

Right now my eyes are always completely on the future. When I hear about the kids and what this has done for them then that is the big reward. It is what keeps it moving towards the future.

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