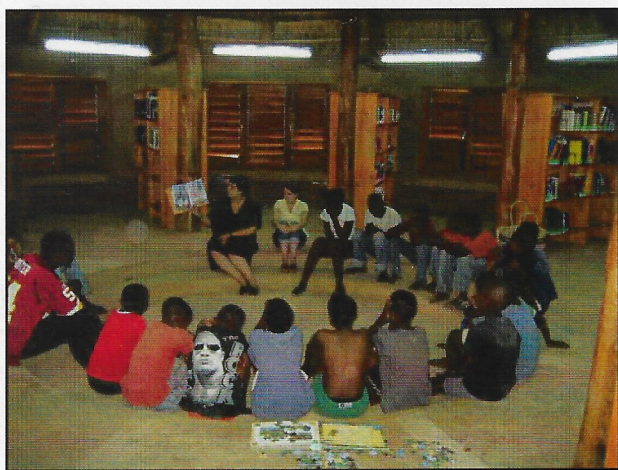


THE LUBUTO LIBRARY PROJECT: THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

Poverty, dust, smiling faces, groups of children avidly listening to the modern 'griot' reading to them, a library full of books. When I spoke to Jane Kenny Meyers these were the images that sprung to mind. The Lubuto Library Project (LLP) has an objective to create educational opportunities and a better life for street kids, orphans, and other vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through this medium the project has created free libraries – safe havens for these children with access to informal education that has improved literacy, language skills and general knowledge. But how many of us know who the founding 'mother' of the LLP?



Jane Kenny Meyers was first introduced to a group of volunteers who ran a drop-in shelter for street kids in Lusaka, Zambia. This shelter "The Fountain of Hope," a sort of home to some 600 street kids was donated by the government of Zambia and was run by 23 volunteers. Jane, a professional librarian, immediately thought it would be a good idea 'to help the children reconnect with society, explore a wealth of information and experience well out of their reach'. She asked to be able to come and read to the kids and a sort of "street kid's library" was established. So, armed with bags of books she went to the shelter and began reading books aloud to the street kids there. Imagine the stir that event must have created. The curiosity, the excitement and the emotion of the young street kids at their first encounter with someone, reading to them. It wasn't long before the LLP was established in a converted shipping container as a makeshift library at the Fountain of Hope shelter in Lusaka. Later, the first Lubuto library

was opened at the Fountain of Hope Drop-in center in Kamwala, Lusaka, in September 2007.

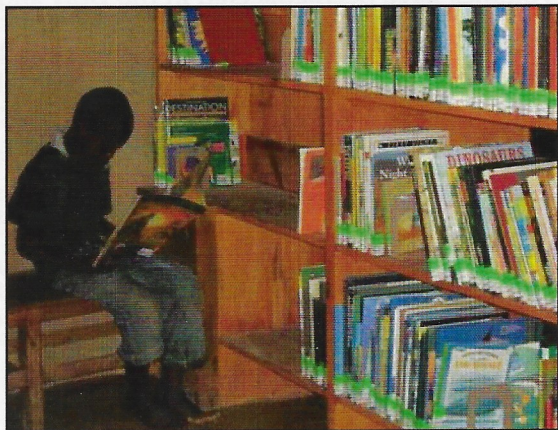
Today the library has acquired book donations from far and wide including some in local languages. Some 4,000 volumes have been collected in the USA and books in local languages have supplemented this collection. There are 7 local languages in Zambia. The LLP collaborates with highly skilled librarians who determine the appropriate types of books, how to acquire and classify them before shipment. The collections include stories and informational books of all levels including those made by the children and information on HIV/AIDS and other health issues. Collections are being carried out in Washington DC and by a group of graduate students from the University of Alabama.

The LLP also 'engages in developing and training Lubuto librarians by assessing the needs of the host organization staff and preparing a manual on management to fit the context in which the library is operating.'

The myriad of programs undertaken by the LLP include: specific programs for children able to attend community schools, programs for Fountain of Hope residents and for children living on the streets, reading programs (network of volunteers to assist in reading programs at the library and partnerships with local elementary schools and universities, storytelling ("to include indigenous methods of communication, entertainment and enculturation"), guest speakers, role models and mentors, drama, music and performing arts, visual arts (conducting art classes), bookmaking workshops (having the children tell their own stories), health and awareness programs. These programs are currently offered by Zambians and expatriates on a volunteer basis. One new area under discussion is to start an environment program. Here the emphasis will be on showing how "nature works, how trees and plants sustain our lives, issues of cleanliness, garbage disposal, recycling, energy conservation, growing food naturally, sustaining nature in an urban environment and global warming". A visit by a teaching artist and urban wildlife photographer is also on the cards.

The LLP project is also working on identifying other library sites through working in partnership with

other host organizations in maintaining non-circulating book collections, securing commitments to provide buildings, staff orientation and ongoing training as deemed appropriate. In fact, two new libraries have been planned in Zambia and talks are underway with business people and NGOs concerning construction of libraries at other sites in and around Lusaka and in other areas of the country.



The LLP is not a literacy program even though it is identified as such. A campaign to raise awareness was initiated here through the US schools program. Its objective: 'to expose American school children to information about the effect the HIV/AIDS pandemic has had on youth in Africa and to enlist their involvement in developing excellent and targeted library collections for Lubuto Libraries'. The film "Kids Like You" narrated by legendary civil rights leader professor Julian Bond effectively "promotes empathy and makes the link between youth in Zambia and the USA."

The program has involved many schools in the Washington area too. There is a need here for children to become aware of the problems facing young children like themselves and, in particular, the orphans in Africa who at times seem to have no way out. Contributing in the development sector illustrates the importance of making an impact. Some of the characteristics which have made the LLP a success are innovative thinking, meticulous planning and governance.

The project helps children "shape their own futures, overcome their past traumas and recognize and express their individual abilities, interests and talents." The objective is to ensure that the children receive quality education and skills training to be successful and contributing members of society.

The most important question to ask when assessing the work of an organization with the profile of the LLP is: what would the situation be like if they were not there? Governments often lack the financial resources or capacity to carry out extended educational and social programs and this is where the LLP is proving effective.

The hard work of the LLP does pay off, though sometimes in unexpected ways for although the LLP may not be able to help every single street kid, their presence alone stands for help, care and sanctuary.



However, there are some realities to be considered. Firstly, many organizations are started by enthusiasts for a particular cause. This is admirable, and the LLP is one such organization. It is sustained by volunteers who have proved that where there's a will, there's a way and that unflagging enthusiasm, energy and support will prevail despite the odds. The LLP is making a big impact on the African mosaic.

Many Fund staffers donate money to Lubuto via the Helping Hands program. Fund families can also get directly involved by volunteering on Sunday afternoons, between 3pm and 6pm, in northwest Washington, DC. Another important way you can help is to consider using your frequent flier miles to donate air tickets between DC/Zambia or DC/South Africa. Such miles are not transferable, but can be redeemed for tickets in anyone's name. So if there were someone who had enough miles on, say, British Airways, for a ticket, they could contact me and arrange to redeem them for use by Lubuto volunteers. If you are able to help in either way, please contact Jane Meyers at mayazi@verizon.net.

Raise money for Lubuto by shopping and searching the Internet with GoodShop and GoodSearch: www.goodsearch.com. See: www.lubuto.org ♦

John Harper