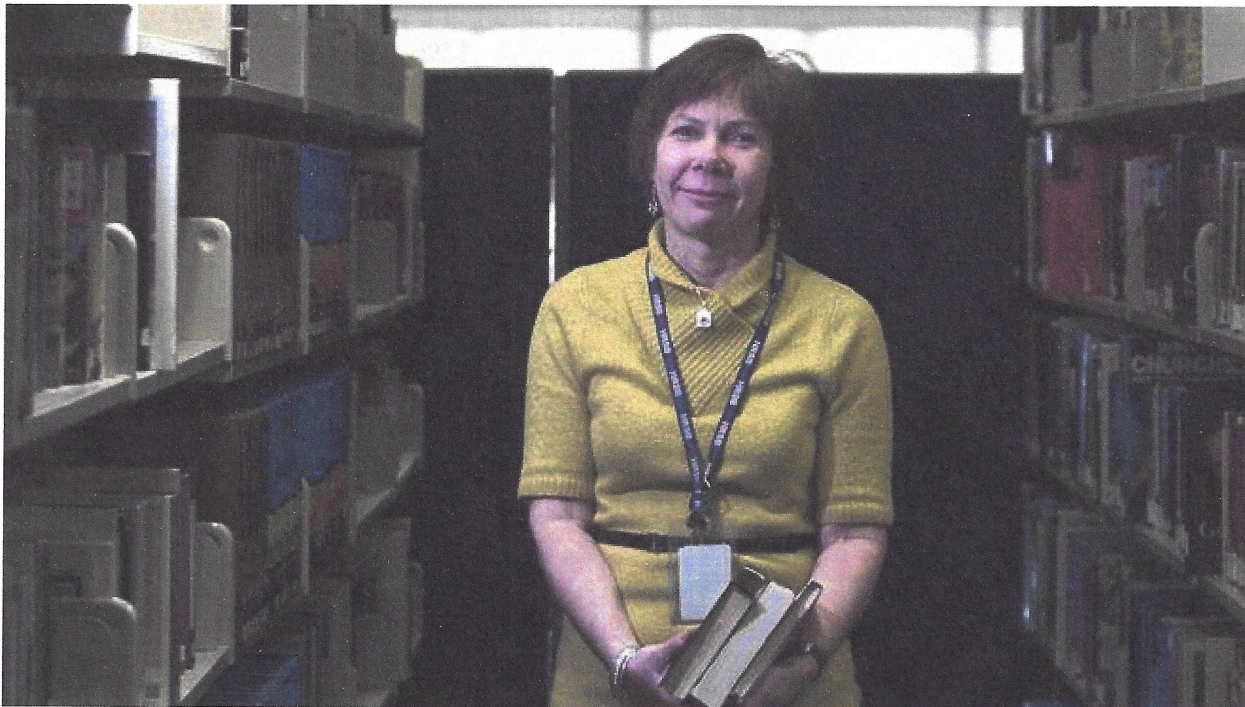


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Jennifer MacKinnon, a librarian at Millwood High School in Lower Sackville, is shown on her last day at her regular job for awhile. MacKinnon has just left for Lubuto, Zambia, where she'll work in a library for street kids. She's volunteering with Cuso International. (INGRID BULMER / Staff)

At a time in her life when many parents are helping their older teens get ready for a gap year, Jennifer MacKinnon is taking one herself.

Last week, the 55-year-old Millwood High School librarian headed off to Zambia to volunteer for a year with a special library project aimed at street kids in the African country's capital, Lusaka.

MacKinnon said in an interview before leaving that she was both excited and afraid. But it's an adventure that she has been building toward for years.

"I was always really interested in other cultures," she said. "I did some volunteer work with MISA (the Metro Immigrant Settlement Association in Halifax, now known as Immigrant Settlement & Integration Services) . . . and I've always been sort of drawn to people from other countries and always been fascinated and asked a million questions."

More than a year ago, MacKinnon decided to try to make her travel and volunteer dream a reality and she enrolled in a course to learn to teach English as a second language.

After completing her course, MacKinnon applied for a position with CUSO International of Ottawa to teach English in Tanzania. It turned out that job had been filled, but CUSO called her with an offer.

"They said, 'We are looking for a librarian in Zambia and we noticed on your resume that you are a librarian, are you interested?' "

That was months ago, and MacKinnon said she's been busy ever since.

"It's a long process — applying to CUSO, then going up for an assessment day in Ottawa and a further week of training in Ottawa . . . and a lot of shots."

MacKinnon has been vaccinated against polio, meningitis, rabies, yellow fever, hepatitis and typhoid. She'll also be taking anti-malaria drugs while she's in Africa.

In Lusaka, MacKinnon will be working with the Lubuto Library Project, and while she is expecting many things to be very different from her work in Lower Sackville, she says some duties will be pretty similar, such as cataloguing, programming and teaching community volunteers about the library.

"And storytime is the same anywhere."

The separated mother admits she's leaving a lot behind, including her 17-year-old son, who is finishing his Grade 12. He'll be living with his father while she's away.

"He's got a great dad, but I'm going to miss him."

MacKinnon is hoping that her adventure will inspire her boy to do something similar one day. For now, he plans to take a gap year next year to do some travelling and work. But MacKinnon says she's been feeding him information on CUSO youth projects.

MacKinnon will also be giving up a year's salary but CUSO is covering her expenses and she'll receive "a very modest" living allowance. CUSO also requires her to raise \$2,000 before her year is over.

"So far, I have \$1,000."

For more information about CUSO International or the Lubuto Library Project, or to contribute to MacKinnon's fundraising effort, go online to [Cusointernational.org](http://Cusointernational.org), [lubuto.org](http://lubuto.org) or [tinyurl.com/jenniferinzambia](http://tinyurl.com/jenniferinzambia).