



The Information Professional's Knowledge Network

## Guru Interview

### **JANE MEYERS, THE LUBUTO LIBRARY PROJECT TURNS THE LIGHT ON**

Jane Kinney Meyers, founder of the Lubuto Library Project, is president and chairwoman of its board of directors (Lubuto means light and enlightenment in the Bemba language). The Lubuto Library Project was incorporated as a non-profit corporation in Washington, DC in 2005. It is a tax exempt public charity whose mission to create educational opportunities for children affected by HIV/AIDS in Africa is about to be implemented with the construction of the first Lubuto Library compound in Zambia.



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*It started with Jane Meyers reading stories to street children at the Fountain of Hope shelter in Lusaka, Zambia. Then a container of books arrived from nowhere and was turned into a makeshift library.*

*The serendipitous good fortune went a long way, triggering the conversion of Jane's caring energy and dedication into the Lubuto Library Project, now a full-fledged international non-profit organisation.*

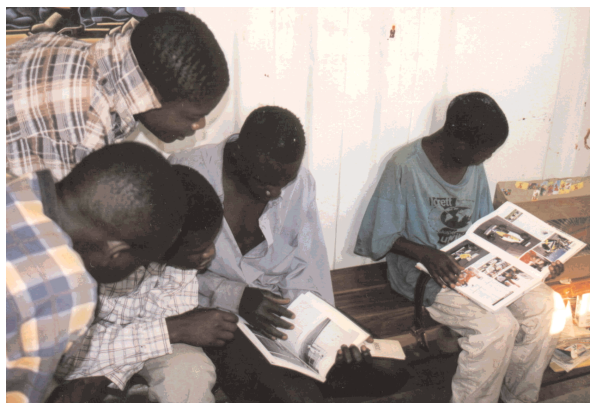


*A year on after our first interview with Jane Meyers, the Lubuto Library Project has completely taken over her life. Jane talks to LibraryLink about the support she has received from the library profession, the*

*challenges she has met over the past year and a brief, yet thought provoking, encounter with rock star Bono.*

This interview comes at a particularly demanding and trying time as Jane is busy raising funds that will go into the construction of the first Lubuto Library compound in Zambia. This June is the deadline to gather all \$40,000 necessary to start the project. A team of architecture students from the University of San Francisco is flying to Lusaka to lend a hand to the construction and learn from this project: "they will be arriving mid-June. These are students in a field of architecture I was never aware of before called "community architecture." They specialise in developing buildings that are addressing particular needs like the ones we're addressing...They are going as volunteers at their own expense to do this. That is why we have a time deadline in front of us in order to get the fund. We need about forty thousand dollars now, but to build all three structures that are part of our entire compound it will cost sixty thousand dollars." The library buildings were designed by Eleni Coromvli, who will also be overseeing all the construction work. Eleni is an architect who has worked alongside Jane since the beginning. She is the Lubuto representative in Zambia and, Jane explains, she has been instrumental in developing the project.

Due to such a tight timeframe, the organisation had to turn towards individual donations rather than rely on grants that would not have come through in time. They have sought support and launched appeals with professional bodies most likely to



*Kids reading at the Fountain of Hope in Lusaka*

understand and support their needs such as SLA, of which Jane Meyers has been a long time member, the Washington, DC, Library Association, and many other local or national associations. One of the Lubuto board members, being a lawyer, put a message out to her law firm, to which Jane originally connected through their librarian. A writer friend put an appeal on her blog, which was later picked up by "The Happy Blogger," one of the best litblogs in the Blogosphere. The International Reading Association got involved in promoting the project in their newsletter and there is even a secure online donation facility available on the official Lubuto website ([www.lubuto.org](http://www.lubuto.org)) for anyone who wants to make a contribution.

Jane is also delighted to have become a reading promotion partner of the Library of Congress's Center for the Book: "That is just a great affiliation for us. It is a very interesting assembly of people. There are a lot of people involved with the literacy programs. It is by no means all librarians. There are people from national funding organisations that aren't really interested in international issues but are really interested in literacy. I need to learn, in partnership with many of these other organisations, about literacy programs for example. We don't really have that expertise in our organisation right now, but we know that, fairly soon, we will have to have literacy experts help us set up some programs for children to learn to read."

The reaction from the public has been consistently positive, both within the professional sphere of librarians and outside it: "we certainly have made headway in terms of people interested in our approach because we are filling a gap. When I am able to get people's attention long enough to understand why we are filling a need they recognise this could be the missing link between kids who are out of school and other educational initiatives."

Sometimes, though, when there is not enough time to explain the premise of the project, reactions can be baffling. It is difficult to imagine Jane Meyers being lost for words, especially when it comes to talking about Lubuto. She provides



*Jane Meyers and Bono in Philadelphia*

ten replies to each question, every time with the same unrestrained enthusiasm. Rock star Bono, however, managed to leave her speechless, but not with star-struck syndrome. During their brief encounter at a charity event in Philadelphia, as she was being introduced to the singer, he asked her, in reference to the Lubuto Project, "Don't the children need lunch more than they need books?" Jane found herself well and truly dumbfounded by the question: "I think I stood there with my mouth open when he said that," she recalls, and then the chance to make her point eluded her as guests moved on. Until then, nobody had ever questioned the importance of the project with such point-blank clarity.

The haunting frustration of this moment has not abandoned her since and she has given it a lot of thought, as the heartfelt response she has now managed to articulate demonstrates:

“Human beings need much more than their basic needs for survival, certainly those come first, but if you don’t give them a purpose in life or give them hope for the future, if you are not concerned about them on a humanitarian level you may be concerned about them being recruited into terrorist activities, for instance. There are many reasons why we need to take them beyond just giving them lunch. But no one had ever asked me that before.” You can tell by her vehemence that the issue goes back to the core of the project’s existence and becomes a pretext to make a luminous demonstration of why it is justified and meets a purpose: “You can’t just keep people alive. You have to keep them alive, you have to keep the faith, you have to keep them healthy and you have to keep them fed. There are lots and lots of groups who have been doing that for a long time now. There are even anti-retroviral drugs available now, although not enough, and those are extremely important efforts but we have to work in tandem with those efforts and also the efforts to try to make universal primary education a fact. We have an important role to play too.”

Just as much as they need lunch, the children need food for the soul. There is an anecdote that Jane is fond of telling, a sort of parable about the quasi-metaphysical role of the library. Before the library was set up at the Fountain of Hope shelter for the street children of Lusaka, the kids had never even heard of volleyball. It’s a book found in the makeshift library that inspired them to improvise a volleyball pitch:

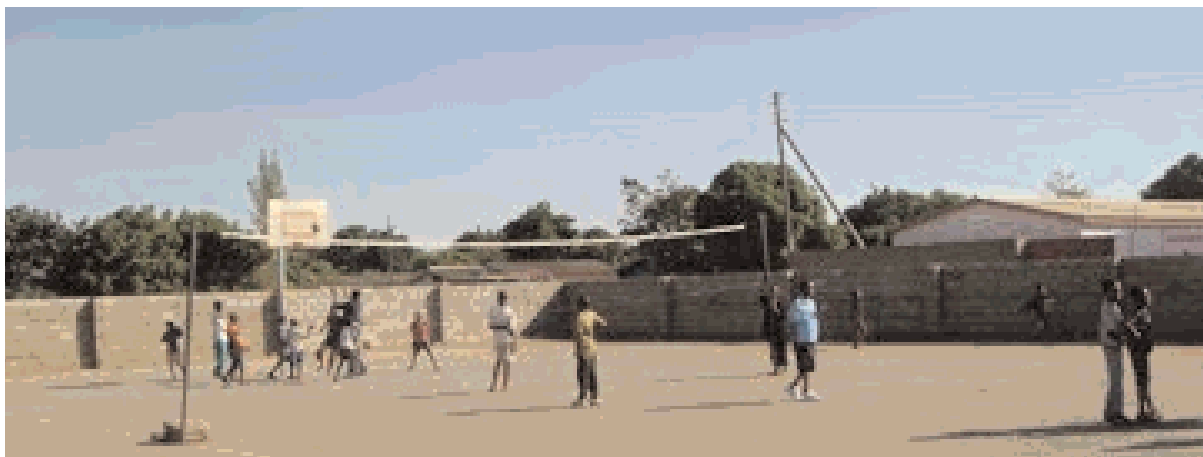
“They went out and they sort of made a ball out of plastic bags, and built up something that was like a net and they figured out how to play volleyball. Now volleyball is apparently the big thing at the Fountain of Hope. I like to tell this story because it helps illustrate a point we always try to make that libraries for these kids are not just a collection of information on how to prevent HIV/AIDS, or even literacy programs, or learning things that will help them in the future. All of these things are important, but also these are human beings, they are young people who need recreation, who need to dream, who need literature, who need poetry, who need history and ways to learn about the world. Volleyball in their lives is just a normal and wonderful thing. It was something that was born out of their initiative in finding this information in the library. I love that.”

Overall, the past year has been a steep but essential learning curve: “I didn’t realise what I was going to learn,” she says, “The two big things that I had to do, here, in Washington - because that was really the horse that needed to come before the cart - was looking for long term financial stability for this organisation, to get it up and running, feed money to get us going and working with organisations. Second, we had to get an accounting system up and running and then we needed to have those accounts audited. We just completed a baseline audit for our organisation a few weeks ago. It was extremely important to do that to have a solid and transparent operation. People want to have the confidence that the money that they give is going to be directed in the way that they see it directed and you really do have to have an organisation that makes that apparent.”

The painstaking effort that was put into building up this framework, difficult as it was, contributed to making the rest of the planning easier: “I found it a very helpful process to go through because you really had to figure out exactly down to the nuts and bolts level how we were going to do what we were going to do and that’s a very solid footing to be on.”

For the time being, Jane is based in Washington, DC, and has very little time to do anything other than concentrate on raising the money necessary to launch the project. She has learnt a great deal about existing support mechanisms. Jane explains that most of the organisations that work with children affected by AIDS get funding from the government from PEPFAR (the President’s Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief). However funding and planning decisions for these organisations are taken in the field, “which is good and appropriate,” Jane stresses, “but as yet, we haven’t got together a salary for our field officer, for her to be able to work for us, not even half time.” The Lubuto office in Zambia is now registered as an official NGO (non-governmental organization), which means “We are now community based in Zambia and able to receive grants that go to such an organisation.” Once the construction of the first Lubuto library compound is well underway, Jane is hoping that she can travel to Zambia to mobilise people and raise awareness there herself.

Looking for funding and resources was always going to be a sizeable challenge with a project of this nature and scope. It is all the more frustrating when organisations such as the Rockefeller



*Street kids playing volleyball at the Fountain of Hope in Lusaka*

Foundation, the Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation and other big names, which are all interested in education in Africa, are not capable of offering financial support to the Lubuto Project on the grounds of internal policies and mechanisms, in spite of the moral support they lend to the project. "The problem is that those foundations are themselves big bureaucracies, like government bureaucracies. Most of them are focused on university level programs and their priorities are maybe reviewed every few years." The Gates foundation, for instance, will only grant its library award to innovative use of information technology, which is just not compatible with Lubuto's book scheme. "While the Africa-focused foundations recognise the need and think that what we are doing is wonderful," Jane reflects, "they are operating at different levels. They really are focused on certain countries, certain universities, training professional librarians. What they fail to consider is that, one in five children in Zambia being an orphan, they may not have many people to populate those universities a little further down the line."

The issue of sustainability was brought up many times but Jane Meyers has a weighty argument against those who express doubts or would like to see the Lubuto Libraries shelter computers rather than books: "We started the library at the Fountain of Hope in 2001, as just a collection of books on shelves that we left there in a very unsustainable health organization. That library now is still standing and is still intact. In fact, that's why we need to build a bigger facility for the Fountain of Hope because they need more space. It's still heavily used and not a single book is missing... If, five years ago, I had left a room full of computers, I can tell you that it would not be there or it would not be functioning." The aim of the Lubuto Library Project has always been clearly "to give as enriching an offering to these children as possible," and the reasoning behind her argument against computers in Lubuto Libraries is grounded in our reality: "If a child could get everything they need from a computer then people here who work with computers all the time would not also buy their children's books."

Jane also has very much at heart to make the Lubuto Library Project an educational experience for children on her side of the Atlantic: "Another one of our goals is to raise awareness, here in the United States, in Canada, maybe eventually in other countries, I hope, as well, of how AIDS has affected children in Africa. We are working with schools to get donated books so we've developed a message of what types of books we would like donated. What we are seeing is that the young people that we have been working with have learnt an awful lot about who these children are and what their concerns are. Children learn, need to learn about who the street kids are, who the children affected by AIDS are, in order to help us organise the books and select the appropriate books. It literally makes them experts, as well as giving them a mechanism to help."

For the months to come, the plan is also to continue the mission of education with American children. A short film about the project called Kids Just Like You narrated by Julian Bond has just had its premiere in Washington, DC, which was attended by Zambian Ambassador Mbikusita-Lewanika and Professor Bond.



*Jane Meyers and singer Faith Hill*

The film was very well received and should be available to watch on [www.lubuto.org](http://www.lubuto.org) shortly. As it turned out, the Lubuto Project has also helped children in the United States. Thanks to a chance encounter on a train with a lady working for the Tug McGraw foundation, Jane Meyers came into contact with singer Faith Hill who organised for the books that were unsuitable for Africa to be sent to children affected by hurricane Katrina. Jane is hoping that further collaboration with Faith Hill will be possible in the future.

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**Jane Meyers has been invited to participate in a White House Conference on Global Literacy that First Lady Laura Bush is convening in September.**

**If you would like to donate to the Lubuto Library Project, visit [www.lubuto.org](http://www.lubuto.org) and make a secure online donation by clicking on the red "Donate Now" button.**

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