## Fountain of Hope: how a makeshift library in Zambia won a battle against AIDS and poverty

At the biennial Umbrella conference organised by CILIP in Manchester, United Kingdom, on July 1st, delegates "unanimously backed a resolution declaring their support for the [Make Poverty History] campaign and calling on the UK government to recognise and promote the essential role that library and information services would play."

If this role had yet to be demonstrated, then the experience of Jane Kinney Meyers in Africa would be enough to prove the point that libraries can indeed make a mighty difference in the fight against poverty. Her extraordinary adventure in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, has changed the course of her life and the fates of hundreds of destitute children whose lives were devastated by the AIDS epidemic.

Jane had lived in Africa before in the mid to late 80s. She was working in Malawi on a world bank project for the Ministry of Agriculture, developing a network of research libraries. When she returned to Africa a decade later, AIDS had brutally reshaped everything: "Everywhere people were dying and you just couldn't avoid it." As the virus was decimating whole generations of parents, orphans were left to live by themselves in the streets, in extremely hostile surviving conditions and with very little hope for the future. They were like refugees in their own country.

Some time around 1998 a friend took Jane to the Fountain of Hope shelter for the first time. Jane was going to donate a stove she had no use for. Once at this drop-in centre for street children she was so moved that she ended up spending the day with the kids. As a librarian she was well aware of the symptomatic lack of books in Africa. As a parent she knew of the need for kids to be told stories. Cunningly, Jane had managed to pack about a thousand children's books with her in her shipment to Zambia. So, a few days after her first visit at the Fountain of Hope shelter she was back with her books and started reading stories to those kids:

**Jane Meyers reading to street children**

“When I would read a book I would go very slowly and made sure I would make eye contact with every one and that’s what parents do when they’re reading to their child. They’re giving them the knowledge they’re important enough to take their time; that this is something wonderful… And sharing this kind of richness, it’s humanity really. It’s something much more fundamental that needs to be given to children, this sense of self worth.”

Little did she know that the time she spent at the Fountain of Hope shelter would eventually completely take over her life. Listening to Jane tell her story you get a sense that the daily challenge of alleviating pain and suffering was far more important than building up big projects for the future. There was no agenda, no immediate guess that a library would dramatically change the lives of these homeless, orphaned children. The sole aim at first was to make the children feel loved, reconstruct pieces of hope in their shattered lives and, quite simply, put smiles back on their faces.

Every day Jane would go to the Fountain of Hope to help them solve problems. Every week she would read stories to the children. A growing number of her friends, mostly expatriates, would join her in the reading ritual:” People wanted to do something and this is such an easy thing, to give someone something, that’s practical, helping the kids, and yet you don’t have to be a nurse or something like that.”

In return Jane received the undivided attention and fascination of the children. And never before had she witnessed greater attention span with kids: “It’s almost a physical comfort to be able to do something like this. You get as much as you give in this sort of activity. It’s certainly the richest thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

Eventually, after a couple of years, a donation of four or five thousand books from England, most probably weeded from children’s public libraries or school libraries, haphazardly made its way to Jane in Lusaka. They arrived in a shipping container along with medicines and other humanitarian aid. Of course, give librarians some books and they’ll make a library. Thankfully another shipping container was purposely donated as a surrogate library building and, before long the newly acquired collection of books graced the shelves of the brand new makeshift Fountain of Hope library.

But the Fountain of Hope organisation was the “most unsustainable” host for a children library. “It was a wild and chaotic situation in the middle of a wild and chaotic city,” Jane recalls. The volunteers were not trained librarians, the books were not catalogued, and yet, in spite of it all, the children were dying to use the books. Five to six hundred of them showed up at the shelter everyday, creating a huge usage potential. “This library is still there five years later, the collection is completely intact but yet it’s heavily used… I don’t think anyone could have predicted or even guessed that.”

The children were longing to learn. They wanted to discover anything and everything about the world. Most of them, speaking an African language as their first language, taught themselves English, knowing it was their only passport to a better life. Jane was equally impressed by their dedication to learning as she was by their lack of knowledge of just about everything we take for granted; from snow and geography to the existence of dinosaurs.

Knowledge is literally the key to a better, more comfortable life with a future for all the vulnerable street kids. If they can enter secondary school they are provided with "food, clothing, shelter, a community and most importantly an education." The irony is that up until then, donations of scholarships to put children in secondary education abounded but the children failed the exam necessary to enter secondary schools because of their lack of general knowledge. At last, thanks to the books at the Fountain of Hope library, they could learn things.

**Children reading at the Fountain of Hope**

In 2002, one year after Jane had left Zambia to return to the United States, and four years after getting rid of her stove, she met again with the Fountain of Hope President while he was visiting the U.S. The report he gave her about the library was beyond her greatest expectations. Children were now passing their secondary school exams "because the exams ask questions of general knowledge about the world and the kids who felt motivated came to the library and studied." This came as a complete shock to Jane: "I couldn't believe it actually." But the rest of the story only added to her surprise and disbelief: the kids who had managed to enter secondary school to study were now coming back to the shelter to help the younger ones.

It was clear at this point that the impact of the Fountain of Hope library would pave the way for Jane's future: "When I heard these reports that's when I realised 'whether I want it or not, this is what I'm going to have to be doing'".

Shortly afterwards a project was conceived. It took a gestation period of several years before the Lubuto Library Project was finally born in January 2005. The organisation was incorporated as a Non Profit Corporation with Jane Meyers for Executive Director. In its first year the objectives of the Lubuto Library Project are to build three libraries in Zambia, raise funds and awareness and develop an educational programme with schools in the United States to collect books.

Jane recounts how she is single-handedly trying to raise political awareness in her country about the project and the critical situation of street children in Africa. She welcomes the step taken by CILIP to do the same in the UK. She also confides that, at last, her sources close to the White House have confirmed that American First Lady Laura Bush, who happens to be a librarian too, is finally personally aware of the Lubuto Library Project. It seems that the project may be one of the initiatives being considered by Mrs Bush and her entourage following her trip to Africa after the G8 summit, although Jane admits cautiously, “I frankly don’t have a clue what this may mean.”

Meanwhile Jane is completely engrossed in the future of the project, relentlessly developing new ways to spread “light, knowledge and enlightenment” – the meaning of Lubuto in Bemba language – across Sub-Saharan Africa and fight the sombre reality of AIDS.

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