One Librarian's Fight Against AIDS

An American librarian works to raise awareness of an epidemic that is plaguing Africa
Story and photos by Jane Kinney Meyers

The library profession has joined many in the United States who are contributing to worldwide efforts to fight the spread of AIDS. While many of our colleagues are collaborating with teams of researchers and developers to combat the disease and are working to make critical AIDS-related information widely available, librarians are focusing their attention on the educational needs of children orphaned by the disease.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa has shattered the traditional role of the extended family that takes over responsibilities in crises. With family means already stretched to the limit and the death toll growing unabated, children being orphaned or turned from broken homes in Africa has become an increasingly common phenomenon. In December 1999, then–U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke visited Fountain of Hope, a drop-in center that shelters over 600 homeless youngsters in downtown Lusaka, Zambia. He and Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.), who accompanied Holbrooke, observed firsthand the plight of tens of thousands of children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic. Holbrooke's experience apparently convinced him that the sometime-fatal disease is creating a serious security risk to the world by leaving huge numbers of children to find their way to adulthood with no families or homes to protect and guide them. Holbrooke subsequently introduced a series of U.N. resolutions that pointed to the threat to world security posed by masses of uneducated and abandoned children in Africa.

In his 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush addressed his administration's determination to address AIDS by introducing an Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. "As our nation moves troops and builds alliances to make our world safer, we must also remember our calling is to make the world better," Bush said. "Today, on the continent of Africa, nearly 30 million people have the AIDS virus, including 3 million children under the age of 15." The president's plan is intended to prevent and treat the disease and to "provide humane care for millions .of people suffering from AIDS and for children orphaned by AIDS."

Dawning of a dream

When I followed my husband on his assignment to Zambia in 1998, I assumed I would work as a library consultant as I had for several years a decade earlier on a library development

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project in the neighboring country of Malawi. My first visit to the Fountain of Hope changed that assumption and, in turn, changed my perspective. I was eventually drawn closer and closer to the center of the problem surrounding me—the ocean of homeless children—and realized that these children and their welfare were a far greater priority. No one knows with any certainty how many street children there are, but it is clear that there untold numbers—perhaps as many as 100,000 in Lusaka alone.

(Top) Students attend classes at the Fountain of Hope school. (Above) Street children share tales they read from the library's collection.

Computers, radios, and Internet access are widely available in much of Africa, but it is still very difficult for most African children to get access to books, and nearly impossible for those who are orphaned. For basic education and literacy programs in Africa, printed books remain the appropriate medium, but efforts to make these books available remain vitally important, especially alongside efforts to provide access to information technology and the Internet.

One day, as I assisted at Fountain of Hope, I sat at my computer keying in a handwritten census of street kids who were housed at the shelter. The census included a 3-year-old boy and a 5-year-old girl among other 5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds, with the list mushrooming with children aged 8 and older. I was struggling to make sense of the extraordinary names and thought that this must have been something like the task faced by immigration officers at Ellis Island in New York City at the beginning of the last century. Is this name really Abearty Mtere? It was nothing like any name that I had encountered in the years I had lived in the southern African countries of Malawi and Zambia. In the process of creating a database, was I also changing forever names and links with the past? The more I thought about it, the clearer it became that this role––changed names and all–

–was part of something new and unparalleled in history.

As I sought to assist the shelter, my first instinct was to read to the children, so I brought along books and did just that. After my first encounter, I decided to recruit others who would welcome an opportunity to help these children in a tangible and satisfying way. I took a new person along with me each week, usually people I ran into socially, and a weekly reading program eventually emerged. Our group worked with Fountain of Hope teachers to provide reading, storytelling, and art classes.

Fountain of Hope street kids (left), who helped unload the many boxes of donated books, can't wait to explore the new selections. Norah Mumba (right), ZLA chairperson and head of acquisitions at the University of Zambia, reads to children during National Library Week 2000.

Lending a helping hand

Most of the volunteers were a bit apprehensive on their first outings because the children they faced were strangers in their own land––orphans, survivors, and some already street-tough who were new to this hard life, but still fragile. The impact of story time was immediate and measurable; the delight in the children's eyes, the innocence in their laughter at storybook antics, and in the manner in which they begged for more. One of my most memorable sessions was sharing my young son's dinosaur books with a group of older kids who never imagined the existence of such creatures and watching these tough-acting teenagers' amazement at the discovery.

During my three years at Fountain of Hope, friends and colleagues from the U.S. and England cajoled publishers, libraries, and others into sending us several thousand new and used children's books; most had been weeded from school libraries. An old metal shipping container, donated by a local business and fitted with windows and doors, became the library for street kids. It was actually more like a reading room with books, arranged in broad subject categories on shelves, bookstore-style.

The library's impact was electrifying. The children, whose lives had been circumscribed by the grimy urban effluence of downtown Lusaka, joyfully received the facility and all that it offered. As a result of this exposure, many of the children were able to pass the secondary boarding-school entrance exam because of their increased general knowledge, reading ability, and improved English-language skills. Prior to the library's existence, few children were able to pass the exam despite the fact that scholarships were available. For homeless children, attending secondary boarding schools not only means an education, but also shelter, clothing, and food—basically a new life.

The library was also available to neighborhood children who lived in the shelter's shadows. Making it accessible to these children proved beneficial to the neighbors' perception of the shelter and has, in turn, benefited the shelter's relationship with city government––a relationship that is critical for a voluntary organization that provides services to disenfranchised children in the middle of a city.

Support from the American Library in Zambia (ALZ) and the U.S. Embassy also contributed to the library's success. For example, the two organizations helped solicit support and assisted in the establishment of a link with the Zambia Library Association (ZLA). During the 2000 observance of National Library Week, whose theme was "Information for Poverty Alleviation," the ALZ provided transportation for about 30 ZLA librarians to attend the televised inauguration of the new Fountain of Hope library. The librarians read from locally published Zambian language books that were purchased with funds donated by a local volunteer association.

Shining a beacon of hope

After my three-year Zambian experience, it became clear to me that the Fountain of Hope library concept could be replicated in other southern African communities where a number of shelters, orphanages, drop-in centers, and other such facilities offer services to street children.

"Lubuto," in the language of the Bemba people of Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, means "enlightenment, knowledge, and light." Thus the goal of these aptly named Lubuto Project libraries is to provide a beacon of hope and learning to children whose futures have been darkened by the AIDS crisis in Africa.

Several Washington, D.C.–area independent schools and their libraries have, through the Association of Independent School Librarians, expressed an interest in the proposed project. Located in communities where a constant supply of used children's books is available, the schools plan to use Lubuto as a means of educating students about the lives of AIDS orphans in Africa. Teachers and librarians will work together to develop projects and programs aimed at benefiting both U.S. and African children. Student involvement will be included as part of school community service requirements.

Under the plan, African umbrella institutions would commit to provide supervision and to make the library available for at least 20 hours per week. They would also be responsible for basic operating costs, such as electricity for lighting and the librarian's salary. A simple manual would outline ideas for organizing materials and managing collections. The institutions must also have the administrative capacity to handle the book-shipment clearance process. Funds would be provided for the purchase of locally published materials, preferably fiction and nonfiction print materials, from the earliest readers through high-school level. U.S. textbooks are not generally useful because of curriculum differences and relevance issues.

Many accomplished Americans, from Benjamin Franklin to Clarence Thomas, have noted the role that America's public libraries have played in uplifting generations of immigrants and creating opportunities for self-betterment. While the understanding is broadly shared that free access to learning and information is a cornerstone of free thought, democratic institutions, social mobility and an informed electorate, it is a blessing that Americans have increasingly come to take for granted. Publicly accessible libraries, instrumental in breaking the chains of poverty, exist almost nowhere in the developing world. To Africans, libraries remain one of the most powerful beacons of hope to children and adults who are desperate for a way to improve their lives and their country. In our country's declared war against the ravages of AIDS, as well as our fight for security and peace in the world, we should not underestimate the potent force of education and libraries.

For more information, write to: Lubuto Library Project 3302 McKinley St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20015, or mayazi@verizon.net.

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