

08 May 2007

Lubuto Libraries Provide Haven for AIDS Orphans, Street Children

U.S.-supported project in Zambia may expand to other African countries

By Louise Fenner
USINFO Staff Writer



Washington -- Children in Lusaka, Zambia, whose parents died of AIDS can find refuge from life on the streets in a special library where they read or listen to stories, learn about the wider world and improve their chances for an education.

The Lubuto Library Project was started by an American woman who believes that, in addition to food and shelter, every child deserves a chance to learn and to hope for a better future. *Lubuto* is a word in the Bemba language of Central Africa that means "enlightenment, knowledge and light," says Jane Kinney Meyers, the project's founder and

president.

The project has taken shape as a Washington nonprofit organization that is collecting 5,000 high-quality children's books to be shipped to Lusaka and housed in a special library being built in the traditional Zambian architectural style. This first library, which will open later this year, will be the model for 100 more the project hopes to build in Zambia and other African countries.

The next two Lubuto libraries are scheduled to be built in the rural communities of Nabukuyu and Itimpi. Each will have a complete collection of children's books in new or excellent condition, said Meyers, because "we want the children we serve to know that we respect them and feel they are worthy of good, new books."

Meyers, an American librarian who spent many years in Africa, notes that for reasons ranging from lack of money to prejudice, children orphaned by AIDS, as well as other street kids, often are unable to attend school. The Lubuto library will provide them "an opportunity to learn," to improve their literacy and even to study for secondary school entrance exams.

In 1998 Meyers visited the Fountain of Hope drop-in center for street children in Lusaka and began reading aloud to the kids. There was an overwhelming response, she said; she would spend one or two hours reading to the children and "they still were begging for more." In 2001 Meyers and the Fountain of Hope staff started a small library in a metal shipping container with books donated from the United States and the United Kingdom, and children lined up to get in.

Meyers, interviewed in Washington, recounted how, a year after her return to the United States, she "began to hear that because of that library, kids were able to go to secondary school." Motivated youngsters were coming to the library and studying for school entrance exams. "The tests ask a lot of questions about things around the world, such as who is the president of the United States, and the kids were able to learn" by reading, she said. "Now those kids are grown up, and they have all finished high school."

Among these are Kenneth Hau, who now does outreach for the Fountain of Hope and wants to work in the new Lubuto library when it



opens. Another young visitor to the shipping-container library, Humphrey Mulenga, graduated from high school and is doing outreach for AIDS prevention groups. His memoir is on the Lubuto Library Project Web site.

The project works with the Zambian Library Association as well as the ministries of education and child development. U.S. donations come from individuals, libraries, book publishers, the National Geographic Society and other donors.



Workers thatch the roof of the first Lubuto Library in Lusaka, Zambia. (Courtesy Lubuto Library Project)

Several secondary schools in the Washington area have conducted book drives, and each Sunday afternoon students help classify the donated books and prepare them for shipment to Zambia. "We are trying to raise awareness among young people here how HIV/AIDS has affected other young people in Africa," Meyers said.

Her daughter Penelope, 17, and son Henry, 14, are involved in the project. Penelope said she learned of the plight of AIDS orphans and other street kids during her years in Zambia with her family. "But I have friends who haven't ever been to Africa who are able to understand the importance of this and have been eager to get involved," she said.

In November 2006 a documentary on the project, narrated by U.S. civil rights leader Julian Bond, premiered at an event hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Lusaka. The Lubuto Library Project "reflects the standards of library services for children in the United States, as well as the American tradition of free access to information and learning," said U.S. Ambassador Carmen Martinez. "Likewise, beginning here in Zambia, Lubuto libraries will provide an opening into the world, making available education, information" and hope for children who need it most, she added.

The new library in Lusaka will replace the shipping container. The main building will have a sunken sitting area in the center for reading or storytelling as well as smaller reading areas around the perimeter. There will also be an arts center. The beauty of the buildings tells the children "that somebody cares about them," said Meyers.

Children will be encouraged to write down stories in their native languages. And, with most of the donated books in English, Meyers said she is eager to find more books in local languages.

Meyers said it is critical that the Lubuto libraries are beautiful, welcoming and respectful of local tradition "because the children we're serving have for the most part been cut off completely from their culture. In a society where your identity is so closely tied with your family and your relationships to your people, it's a profound trauma not to have [those] connection[s]."

"We want these libraries to be the place where society reaches back and pulls them back in," she said.

More information on the Lubuto Library Project is available on the organization's Web site.

(USINFO is produced by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)

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