

Setting up a school library in Zambia

By Elsemieke Wishart

"Mom, you just want to be a librarian and read books to kids in Africa," my daughter joked with me while we were trying to sort through hundreds of books at an orphanage in Zambia. That was five years ago, and it was then that I decided that I did want to be a librarian and set up a school library in Africa. With the support of family, friends and the organisation I worked with I was able to accomplish this goal. My daughter's comment to me about me wanting to be a librarian stirred up an interest that was already there just not recognised. (Read my daughter's perspective in her blog:

<http://justsaskia.wordpress.com/2012/09/23/seeing-the-beautiful-and-strong-in-my-mother/>)

As a family we enjoy going on short term trips to developing countries to help make a difference in the world. Many of our trips have been to Zambia with Seeds of Hope Children's Ministry an organisation that we have been involved with since 1999 (www.seedsofhopecm.com). Seeds of Hope (SOH) care for children affected by and infected with HIV. They have built homes for HIV affected children in Zambia and in Myanmar. Looking after these orphaned children is an insurmountable task that includes medical care, food, housing, education and most of all love. In 2001 SOH established the Buseko Children's Home in Ndola, Zambia for children orphaned by the AIDS crisis. HIV/AIDS has devastated the African continent leaving over 14 million orphans, including more than 600,000 Zambian children. During the first years SOH was more concerned with giving the children quality of life before they succumbed to illness as a result of AIDS; but in 2004 the availability of anti-retro viral medication drastically changed their circumstances. Children who were not expected to live into their teens became healthy and began to thrive. SOH had to start planning for the futures of these children. They established a boarding school called Grace Academy on a 55 acre plot of land just outside of the city of Ndola in Zambia.

Our family spent two months in Zambia in 2009 and I had offered to organise the books that made up the school library collection. These books had been donated at different times and were arranged on the shelves in an office area in no particular order. Some of the books were in bad shape and needed to be discarded but it didn't take me long to realise that I had no idea how to organise the books properly. When we returned to Canada I registered for the Library and Information Studies program at the University of the Fraser Valley (<http://www.ufv.ca/libtech.htm>) in Abbotsford, British Columbia. While I started school I also began planning to set up a functioning school library at Grace Academy in Zambia. In June 2012 I received my Library Technician Diploma and in September 2012 I travelled to Zambia with a team of volunteers to set up the library. Grace Academy High School now has a well-equipped school library that has opened up a world of information and ideas that was not available before. The library is available to the students, employees and friends of Seeds of Hope in Zambia.

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A library is not the most pressing item on the list when deciding how to help orphans and vulnerable children (OVC's) in a developing country. But once the very basic human needs of OVCs are met there is a need for education and information to provide the children with hope for a future. A well-equipped library is an integral component to providing a good education for children. Unfortunately there is an extreme lack of libraries in Sub Saharan Africa. I am convinced that libraries have an important role in alleviating poverty in countries like Zambia. In 2011 I attended the 7th Annual Pan-African Reading-For-All Conference in

Gabarone, Botswana and presented a paper titled 'Library and Information Provision for African Relief'. (<http://www.rw.org.za/index.php/rw/article/view/20>). In this paper I explain why providing information through libraries can help bring people out of poverty.

Libraries are almost non-existent in public schools in Zambia and there is no funding available. If a school does have books they are often locked up for safe keeping, the books are usually out-dated textbooks and there is a lack (or absence) of books to read for pleasure. One school SOH visits—Baluba Basic School—has 1,005 pupils and only 800 books. This means if 800 students each take one book home, 200 children are without a book. When I visited this school and asked to see their library I was told that the room was locked and the teacher with the key was absent.



For Grace Academy library we collected approximately 8,000 donated new and gently used books in Canada. Volunteers helped me sort through the donations and divide the books into fiction, non-fiction, reference and textbooks. We packed the books into 110 banana boxes collected from grocery stores (banana boxes are sturdy, stack well and are uniform in size). We kept a general record of the titles we packed but we did not have time to make a detailed list. Ideally I would have liked to catalogue the books before shipping but a container became available sooner than expected and there was only enough time to pack up the books. Subsequently we did not have to raise funds for shipping the container as another organisation had donated the funds to Seeds of Hope.

In September 2012, a team of eight volunteers—two of us library technicians and the rest willing helpers—travelled to Zambia to set up the library. We had two weeks to get the books on the shelves, start the cataloging and hire a librarian. We spent our time organising the books, stamping, sticking on spine labels and barcodes and taping. We had brought all of our supplies with us, including book ends. Meanwhile carpenters were still finishing some of the shelves and building the desk for the librarian.



We chose to use an open source integrated library system called OpenBiblio (<http://obiblio.sourceforge.net/>), designed for small libraries it was fairly easy to install, easy to use and it was free. We had no internet available so we could not import MARC records; all the cataloguing was done manually, using a simplified Dewey Decimal System. We had purchased refurbished bar code scanners and one of our team members donated a laptop. Instead of purchasing barcode labels my husband Robin made the barcode labels for us. We also managed to purchase a printer/photocopier in Ndola. The library room is part of the annex of four laboratory rooms across from the high school, this room is a good size, has windows, electricity, a secure door and a good roof.

The library is now open; we managed to hire a librarian to catalogue the rest of the collection and to train the volunteers. Presently the library is being maintained by one of the teachers at Grace Academy. While we were setting up the library we let the students help us, this made our job busier but the reward was watching the children as they would work on a book—they would eventually take a second look at the book they were handling and start to get absorbed with the content.

This project was a great success and with this experience I learned some things that will help if I get to be involved with another project. For the future I am working on adding more Zambian content and books published in Africa to the library collection. I am thrilled to think about the possibilities that are in the library, the potential for learning and creativity that can be sparked and the love for reading that is now being passed on in a part of the world where a library did not exist before.

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