

This article, written by Rinda, appeared initially as a Letter to the Editor of the Lake Oswego Review, September 11, 2008

WHO CARES ABOUT A LIBRARY IN AFRICA?

It all started when a little boy came to my door. I was sitting on the step of my cinder block hut, writing in my journal. It was like any morning in Kenya, hot, muggy, the sun up at 6:30 sharp. I greeted the little boy and then he sat down by me. It was clear he wanted to ask me something. When he finally got up the courage to do so, I was most surprised. He didn't want food. He didn't want money. He asked if I had a book he could read.

Luckily I did. He sat beside me and leafed carefully through its pages. I asked if he might like to take the book home, and the smile spread across his face. It had never crossed his mind that he could be so fortunate. To be able to look through a book was one thing, but to get to take it home? Unbelievable good fortune. I explained that it must be returned to me the next day. With an earnest look and a nod, he promised to do so.

Before I knew it, he'd told his friends. They were soon at my door, quickly exhausting my supply of children's books. And sure enough. The next day the children were back to turn in their treasures. Could they trade and take home another book?

I knew the books would be read over and over and I expected them to come back tattered, but there was not even a spec of the dust from their mud huts to be found on them. Their reverence for the books had resulted in such care!

With the return of their books came the birth of an idea. This area needed a library! The idea wasn't entirely new. It had been germinating during the weeks I'd been in Kenya checking on the educational programs that we'd been working on for the last three years. I had sensed the community's longing for books from the first time I'd come to stand before a class of seventy students in their mud classroom, all eyes on me, hoping that I might be able to teach them some small piece of what they longed to learn.

In fact "learners" is what they are called in Kenya. Not students, but learners. They had come to learn, and I had been humbled by their eagerness and discipline. They suck up knowledge like their parched piece of earth sucks up all-too-scarce rain. Their stomachs are empty, but they arrive with their little workbooks and pencil stubs, ready for the day.

Digging deeper in to the culture that I'd grown to love, I found it wasn't just the young children that longed for access to books. The teachers themselves long to enhance their own educations. The high school students in our sponsorship program struggle, despite their bright minds, because of lack of textbooks. Parents long to be able to take literacy classes. Even educated people that choose to return to their rural homes know they will spend the rest of their lives without access to books! As in much of rural Africa, where electricity has not yet made its debut, access to information is limited to an extent that is hard for us cyberphobes to even imagine.

It was books, books filled with the mystique, adventure and tragedy of Africa that eventually took me there. It was books that took me to rural Kenya, never to be the same. Surely your life has been shaped, enriched and enlivened by books in powerful ways as well. If you remember the thrill of seeing the Bookmobile come up your street, or know that feeling of anticipation as you look through a shelf of books, looking for that one right piece of information, or if you've felt the warm satisfaction of holding a new book in your hand, its journey about to unfold, you'll know why books matter.

I don't know what will become of the little boy that came to my door asking for a book, but I do know that he's bound to be better off because people somewhere across the globe decided to share the light of learning.

Who cares about a library in Africa? I do. And I hope you do too.