

# A Special Librarian Creates a Special Library

WHAT STARTED WITH A BROKEN STOVE LED TO A NEW PROJECT TO BRING LITERATURE—AND LITERACY—TO CHILDREN IN AFRICA.

BY FORREST GLENN SPENCER

**T**here is hope under construction in sub-Saharan Africa. The first Lubuto Library is opening this spring in Lusaka, Zambia. It is an ambitious endeavor to give homeless children affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic a rich haven where they can read books and learn.

The disease has ravaged that nation and the parental core of its society. According to a 2002 survey, one in six Zambians ages 15 to 49 are infected with HIV; young women ages 15 to 24 are infected four times more than their male counterparts. It is estimated that 1 million Zambians are living with HIV; a

Zambian's life expectancy is 38.1 years, one of the lowest in the world.

One result of the epidemic is that one in five children is orphaned, many living on the streets and without hope. These are the targets of the Lubuto Library Project.

The project is the brainchild of Jane Kinney Meyers, an SLA member in Washington, D.C., who has had a long association with that part of Africa. She is the president and board chair of the non-profit organization founded to give these children a place of learning and connection.

"It is a project is that is targeting the most vulnerable of children affected by HIV/AIDS who are primarily out of school because of the epidemic," Meyers described. "We are building publicly accessible libraries for them. There is no other project like this that is trying to reach those children and, at the same time, engaging U.S. children in the effort. The libraries will be initially stocked with a collection of books primarily—at this point—hat we gather

## Jane Kinney Meyers

**Joined SLA:** 1982

**Job:** President and chair of the board of directors, Lubuto Library Project, Inc.

**Experience:** 30 years

**Education:** MLS, University of Maryland College of Library and Information Services, 1978; bachelors, University of Arizona, 1976 (Summa Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa)

**First job:** Reference staff at the National Agricultural Library

**Biggest challenge:** Finding financial support for the Lubuto Library Project





**The Reading Room of the first Lubuto Library under construction in February.**

here in the U.S. in programs working with schools, many other librarians, volunteers, and people involved with the publication of children’s books.”

Each library is designed to hold a book collection of 10,000 volumes. At present, 5,000 books, all in English, are being sent initially from the U.S. The libraries will have a specialized classification scheme to provide access that is simple and sustainable. The project also is attempting to connect the children with traditional storytelling and indigenous tales in many local languages that are no longer in print.

A Lubuto library will be composed of three structures, based on indigenous architectural styles and following the traditional layout patterns of Zambian homesteads. There will be a reading room, an arts center, and an entrance structure.

“We’ll have story-telling events,” Meyers said. “We’ll have children transcribe stories and make books for their own libraries. We’ll have them tell their own stories. There’s going to be much

more enrichment...that’s very specifically tied to local culture. There’s almost nothing for children in print in the Zambian languages. Zambia has seven main languages, and you could hold in one hand the number of books that are in print for children. It’s very sad, and the reason this is important to our mission is that we want to build literacy,

and it’s easiest to learn to read in your original language.”

### **More Libraries Planned**

The library opening this spring in Lusaka is the first of 100 libraries the project plans to build in Zambia and some neighboring countries, like Malawi. The plan is to open two more libraries in



**Model of the first Lubuto Library Project library.**



**Jane Meyers, left, with Zambia Permanent Secretary of Education Lillian Kapulu, at the White House Conference on Global Literacy at New York Public Library.**

Zambia this year. The project selects sites where there are at least 500 children ages 5 to 18 within walking distance.

The collection will emphasize informational books.

“When people want to donate books, they generally give fiction,” Meyers said. “We request donations of non-fiction, informational books. But if people insist on giving fiction we recommend sending us the classics, folk stories from different cultures, or beautifully illustrated picture books—that sort of thing because, by definition, classics transcend cultural differences.

“In Zambia, we added materials on HIV/AIDS and dealing with psychological trauma that some organizations are creating for an African audience. We don’t include magazines and periodicals, and we’re asking for brand-new or like-new books.”

The Lubuto Library Project has gotten help from individuals at the National Geographic Society, including many National Geographic books. “Almost everything they publish is in English and a good choice for our libraries,” she added, “because they’re beauti-

fully illustrated about the whole world.” Guidelines are detailed online at [www.lubuto.org](http://www.lubuto.org).

In addition, Meyers said, biographies are a good fit culturally with Africa. “There’s a sense of the largeness and dignity of individuals who have come from nothing and overcame odds. I cannot think of anything better for these children.”

As construction of the first library nears completion and the books are readied for air shipment, plans are being made to build the next two.

“We are working closely with the host organizations and communities in Zambia to seek construction funds,” Meyers said. “We’ve gotten tremendous support in Zambia from the business community and other governments, as well as the U.S. Embassy. Our indigenous library design is beautiful and will create permanent structures that are rooted in the community.”

Meyers has had a long history with Africa, living first in Malawi for almost four years from 1986 where she ran a World Bank-funded development project and a second three-year posting when she followed her husband to

Zambia in 1998 on behalf of his work with the International Monetary Fund.

But it was a broken stove that began a series of chain events and led to the creation of the Lubuto Library Project. Meyers recalled how she and her husband needed to replace a stove because two of the burners did not work. They could not purchase a new one locally so IMF shipped them a replacement. Meyers called a friend who ran a large AIDS project in Zambia and asked if anyone could use a working-stove with two broken burners.

“My friend took me to this place in the middle of Lusaka called the Fountain of Hope. It was run by young Zambians who volunteered full time. It was started by four young Zambian men; but by the time I came there, there were about 25 volunteers who came there every day and took care of some 600 street kids who came to this center,” Meyers said.

“They were given this dilapidated old building by the city and they got some occasional donations from the World Food program, so they were able to offer meals once every four days to these children. They started a little informal school, and I went and spent the entire day. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing and how incredible these people were, by doing this work. By the end of the day I asked if I could come another time and read to the kids. They were puzzled by this request but they said sure. The next Friday I showed up with a bag of books and I started reading. Eventually word got around and more people joined in. It was satisfying and rewarding. I became a member of Fountain of Hope’s board and started going almost daily.”

After a couple of years, a container from the U.K. arrived in Zambia. It contained wheelchairs and medicine that the center was expecting, but it also, unexpectedly, held books.

Meyers went out to the airport and examine several thousand volumes that had apparently been weeded from British libraries, mostly non-fiction. The thought of adding a library to the Fountain of Hope center was born. A 20-foot shipping container was donated





Meyers with Bono.

to be used as the structure. By the summer of 2001—around the time Meyers and her husband were planning to return to Washington, D.C.—the Fountain of Hope library opened.

“It was a big event with members of the Zambia Library Association coming during Library National Week,” Meyers remembered. “The U.S. embassy provided a bus so members of the association could come out, visit, and read to the kids. They asked if that we could continue linking them directly in this way with the street children.

“On the flight back to the U.S., I

told my husband that I didn’t want to go back working in a downtown library but to continue doing what I just did in Zambia, and he said, ‘Well, start-up your own NGO.’”

Meyers spent the next couple of years thinking about that possibility and talking with others—motivated by reports from the Fountain of Hope of the effect the library was having on the community. Many of the youngsters—thanks to the availability of the books—were able to pass entrance exams and take advantage of scholarship money to attend high schools.

“Once I heard this I realized we had to make more of these libraries available,” Meyers said. “That’s been the model we used for the size of the collection, the nature of it, and in serving about 500 children. We have learned more since then.”

### Help Through DC SLA

To keep the project focused, Meyers moved to start her own organization.

She began getting the word out through the DC SLA listserv and in her children’s school newsletters.

“Through my son’s school we found a lawyer who knew how to form and incorporate an organization and helped us pro bono. Through the DC SLA listserv, I sought space for donated books, book-trucks, and bookends.

“We got the point in our organization where we needed to get our charity status. Again, I went back to the DC SLA listserv asking if anyone knew anybody that could help us. I put that out at the end of the day. At the opening of business the next day, there were a number of e-mails in response.”

Meyers said that most of the project’s financial support has come from book-related professionals. “That’s the incredible thing about SLA members. Some librarians who may have heard me speak at SLA last spring went back to their organizations and asked if they would consider helping our project. Special librarians are centrally unique to

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our profession, the way people will cooperate and network in order to support one another. It's astounding."

Meyers knows personally how libraries can change a person's life. "There's a powerful story that the five children in my family were raised with," Meyers said. "My mother, who was born in 1912, was raised in a poor family in south Philadelphia. When she graduated from high school, she had no prospect in going to college. This was around 1930. She had a job, but would spend all her free time at the wonderful Philadelphia Free Library. Around 1930-1931, this extraordinary woman physician, who had reached the end of her career as a doctor, came into the library and said wanted to send

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another woman through college and medical school and did they have any ideas. And they said, 'Well, how about Mary Seamon – she's bright.'

"So, my mother got a scholarship through the Philadelphia Free Library. She met my father in medical school at Loyola Chicago. We five kids in my family grew up with the idea that we owed our very existence to the opportunity that came to my mother through that library. My parents—especially my mother—were friends of the public library, especially in my hometown. I even worked there one summer, after high school. I worked in the university library, shelving books. I never consciously thought that one day going into this profession until the end of my senior year."

Meyers graduated from the University of Arizona in 1976 with a bachelor's in English, and then traveled to the University of Maryland for a graduate assistantship. Meyers was able to work 20 hours a week and pay no tuition to earn her MLS.

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"It was a great time to be trained as a librarian," Meyers said, "because it was just at the time things were changing in terms of technology. I remember taking computer programming classes and writing a circulation program in COBOL, using punch cards, and have it spew-back huge printouts because

with the World Bank, she became a member of SLA. "It was the organization that was relevant to what we were doing. We were starting something new in this incredible institution which required a lot of networking and support from colleagues." Over the years, she has become closely associated with members of the SLA DC Chapter, including former President Susan Fifer Canby, who in charge of the National Geographic Society Library, and Ann Sweeney, who has become the Lubuto Library Project's chief volunteer.

Meyers's days are filled with the work of the project. She spends her time mainly on the computer and the telephone, and often in contact with Lubuto's regional office in Lusaka. There's much excitement in many quarters for the potential success and benefits from the Lubuto Library Project.

People have often asked Meyers how they can get involved with international librarianship and she tells them special librarians have much to offer the world because of their inventiveness and entrepreneurship.

"When you're working with other cultures," Meyers said, "you start with the essence of what a special librarian is and then learn what you need to learn about the culture or the specific situation and apply to that. I think special librarians are the ones equipped to work internationally because we are very creative and very, very open. The whole Lubuto Library Project is a very special library approach. If people are interested in working internationally it's important to understand the necessity and the power that networking and the professional support you can get from this community." **SLA**

there were no terminals!

"There was also an advanced reference course in my last year that offered online searching. What was nice at that time was the solid training in reference services, social services – the traditional ways of librarianship – but we were also exposed to new technologies in courses system analysis. I was thinking of becoming an information broker. I knew I wanted to do something a little bit different and but there was something in being entrepreneurial."

In 1982, Meyers began working for World Bank, developing a library for the 750 agriculturists who were employed there. She worked with colleagues in other sectors to consolidate information services into a single library to serve the entire World Bank.

She was offered a position with a World Bank project in Malawi in 1986, introducing CD-ROM technology to the country and establishing the first positions for professional librarians in Malawi's civil service.

The same year she began working