

## **Rwanda Books for Peace Project Takes Important Step towards Ending Rwanda's Book Famine by the Access Project**

"Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world. It is also a weapon that the world cannot do without in the fight against AIDS. Education saves lives."  
Nelson Mandela

An Access Project Peace Corps Volunteer is leading an effort that has so far brought more than 20,000 books to schools, clinics and community centers in rural Rwanda.

In August, the Rwanda Books for Peace Project distributed books ranging from novels to medical books to 13 communities in rural Rwanda, supplementing existing library spaces and creating new ones. The books, donated by the U.S.-based non-profit Books for Africa, will provide students, teachers and all community members with an opportunity to hone their reading and research skills, improve their English, and promote a culture of reading in Rwanda.



**Above: a clutter of unused books in a Kigali university.**

In January 2009, Rwanda welcomed its first group of Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) since the 1994 genocide. Once they moved into their assigned communities, the volunteers noticed that most schools libraries had fewer books than a typical American home. Where they existed, the library spaces in schools and communities were disorganized and mostly stocked outdated or irrelevant materials. Community members also expressed concern that, although the Rwandan government had adopted English as an official language in January 2009, most reading materials in schools, community centers and other libraries were in French.

Even where libraries did exist, students did not know how to use them for basic research or studying, and many library supervisors were too nervous about losing books to allow anyone besides authorized teachers to enter the rooms. "When I began working with the secondary school in my village, I noticed that the library space was tiny, everything was in French and the most recent materials dated back to the 1980s or 1990s," said Kamonyi PCV Edison Reyes. "There was an obvious need to bring English-language books, and books in general, to the over 900 kids at the school." After PCVs from across Rwanda met for an in-service training in July 2009 and voiced similar concerns over the country's book famine, Access Project PCV Jessica McGhie decided to develop the Rwanda Books for Peace Project.

Why name the effort Books for Peace? "The benefits of literacy extend to health and mutual understanding between age, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. We wanted to give our community members the opportunity and physical space to foster these values" McGhie said. Many studies have drawn conclusive links between literacy and healthier communities. According to a 2002 World Bank report, when children, especially young women, are provided with education they have greater economic options and autonomy. They also have the knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to make informed choices about how to delay marriage and childbearing, have healthier babies, avoid commercial sex and other risky behaviors, and gain awareness of their rights.

To ensure community participation and ownership in the library project, each community working with a PCV to receive books provided 25% of the total project costs: These included the cost of shipping, finding and equipping a safe, accessible space for the libraries, and hiring a librarian. The PCVs raised the balance of the US \$20,000 needed for shipping through the Peace Corps Partnership Program Website, which allows volunteers to showcase and raise funds for their projects.

Although the Access Project is focused on improving management systems in Rwanda's health centers, Country Director Dr. Blaise Karibushi leaped at the chance to support the overall well-being of Access-supported communities by applying Access Project funds to pay for those communities' required investments. The libraries in Gashora and Musanze will be accessible to the surrounding communities, which made it necessary to order textbooks, novels and reference materials for a variety of ages and educational levels. The Access Project consulted with community, district and health center leaders before ordering academic and leisure reading books for primary, secondary and post-secondary students and professionals—a mix that encourages people to visit the libraries.



**Above: Librarians discussing possible cataloguing systems during the librarian training**

Preparing for the books' arrival was more complicated than placing orders, finding locations and building shelves. In a country with few libraries and fewer trained librarians, each community was responsible for identifying a librarian to be trained in a two-day librarian training organized by McGhie and funded by Peace Corps Rwanda. During the training, 30 librarians and PCVs from their communities collaborated to discuss goals and plans for their libraries and listened to a number of well-established Rwandan librarians discuss basic organizational and logistical methods for starting and developing libraries. The interactive training also introduced the librarians to creative library programming ideas, such as giving book talks to children and adults and hosting cultural events in libraries.

When the approximately 20,000 books arrived in 368 large boxes on August 30, 2010, the sorting process began immediately and lasted almost two weeks. Upon seeing the mountain of books designated for Gashora and Musanze, Dr. Karibushi said, "I was absolutely impressed by the quality and variety of the books. This valuable donation will be the tipping point for promoting a culture of reading amongst the youth of Gashora and Musanze."



**Above: PCVs Emily duBois Hollander and Madison Hoover begin the sorting process**

After all communities sent representatives to retrieve the books, librarians and PCVs began introducing the impressive assortment of books to their communities, using the lessons they learned during the training. In Musanze, Access Project PCV Amy Studenic and librarian Gilbertine Umutesi are preparing an opening celebration for their library in October 2010, during which time Musanze District officials, Dr. Karibushi and librarian Umutesi will introduce the library to the community by giving speeches outlining the library's purpose and program offerings and conducting a library tour.

What about the secondary school library, which PCV Reyes once described as being all but useless to the students? "We now have plenty of books," Reyes said, "In fact, there are now more than enough books for each student to use in class and also check out of the library to study with and enjoy at home."

