

It Takes a Village to Build a Library

Geography Student Promotes Literacy in Uganda

The abundance and variety of books and resources available to an average American student is unfathomable to children in Uganda, who leave school as early as fourth grade to work in the fields. As a coordinator for the Foundation for Children and Education in Uganda (FCEU), geography Ph.D. candidate Joel Hartter is working to promote literacy in the western part of the country through the establishment of libraries and education programs in small communities surrounding Kibale National Park in western Uganda—giving hope to people lacking educational outlets and opportunities for advancement.

While visiting Uganda to conduct preliminary dissertation work in the summer of 2005, Hartter saw the disparity between the U.S. and the area first hand. During this trip, he met a local field assistant, Moses Mugenyi, who through the efforts of FCEU founders and University of California at Davis postdoctoral students Freerk Molleman and Gosia Arlet, agreed to allocate a quarter of his four-room house to be used as a public library.

Upon returning to UF,

Hartter launched a major fundraising campaign, which resulted in 600 pounds of books and enough donations to send them to western Uganda—much to the delight of Mugenyi. “When I returned, Moses had totally forgotten that I had made a promise,” says Hartter. “So often, the promises made by well-intentioned foreigners remain unfulfilled.” This promise has expanded to the establishment of three additional community libraries in the villages of Ruteete, Kigarama and Nkingo.

Hartter says the organization of each library begins with selecting a location, then renting out a storefront and hiring a part-time librarian. The team prefers women librarians, since most Ugandan women have little economic opportunity outside the home. While the majority of the books come from the U.S. and are printed in English, the team also travels to the capitol city of Kampala to purchase texts by East African and Ugandan writers, as well as books written in the local languages of Rutoro



More than 100 locals line up to be among the first to visit the new community library in Nkingo, Uganda during its official opening ceremony. Villagers in one of the area's poorest neighborhoods now have access to books, dictionaries, newspapers and magazines.



JOEL HARTTER

and Rukiga.

The purpose of the libraries goes beyond lending books, dictionaries, newspapers and magazines to the village people. The foundation has also established language classes in Rutoro and English, created a nursery school in Kanyawara, and provides small scholarships to secondary school students. It also offers various trade programs, such as tailoring, aimed at teaching

women marketable skills, since a major goal of the foundation is to provide economic opportunities for women. "We try to get as many women involved as possible," Hartter says. "It's open for anybody, but our target audience is women out of school."

The newest library, established in Nkingo, is the first introduced on the east side of Kibale National Park, where the local ethnic majority, the Bakiga,

tend to be poorer than the Batoro of the western side. The foundation has begun Rukiga classes and plans to introduce English classes at this facility soon, in addition to environmental education courses. In conjunction with a community conservation group funded through the United Nations Development Program, the foundation will focus on promoting sustainable forest and wetland use in Nkingo. The

goal is to provide a forum for farmers to discuss problems, construct possible solutions and build an understanding of basic conservation issues.

"We see our mission as being so much more than simply providing educational materials to these impoverished people," says Hartter. "We want to open the door to a better life for them through these libraries that serve as centers of

learning."

Looking to the future, the foundation is now planning a fifth library in the region, outside of Fort Portal. It only takes \$800 annually to fund an entire library, and Hartter is hoping to continue establishing libraries throughout the area. To learn how you can get involved in the Foundation for Children and Education in Uganda, please contact Joel Hartter at jhartter@ufl.edu.

—Yelena Moroz