

Field Notes from Botswana, August 2007 by Chris Bradshaw



In August 2007 our family traveled to southern Africa to visit our African partners and to visit some of the libraries that we have worked to create over the past 2 years. It was an exciting venture, our first trip to Africa in 3 years, when we first conceived the idea of sending gently used books to African communities and schools that desperately need reading material. Here are some highlights from the Botswana portion of my family's trip. Lesotho will follow.

Our host in Botswana was Olga Tsimanyina, a Ministry of Education official who actively supports the training and development of teachers and schools in the South District of the country. She is our partner for establishing 100 primary school libraries over the next 18 months. This is an amazingly ambitious undertaking for a developing African country, but Botswana has shown huge dedication to educating its citizenry.

I had already spoken by phone with Olga so often that I felt as though I were meeting an old friend. Olga's dynamism and passion for educating Botswana children (the people of Botswana are known as the Batswana) is only surpassed by her warmth and organizational abilities. Everywhere we went, people enthusiastically greeted Olga with respect and admiration, and this confirmed my conviction that we are so fortunate to work with her.

During our two and a half days in the capital city of Gaborone, my family and I met with a wide variety of government and NGO officials. These include leaders from the Botswana Teacher Training and Development Department, the University of Botswana's Library Science Faculty, and the staff of Peace Corps Botswana. We also met with the Chief and Deputy Chief of Tlokweng village and the Tlokweng Library Development Committee. We worked on issues of shipping, training for teacher-librarians, collection quality and management, and staffing. In each case, it was highly beneficial to work face-to-face on library development and to plan how to pool our joint resources to tackle challenges.



After our meetings in Gaborone, we traveled to Kanye, home of the South District Teacher Training and Development Office. The leadership of the Umbrella PTA and local government and education officers welcomed us warmly. They thanked us (and many of you!) many times over for our gifts of books. The African Library Project has already shipped 50 of the 100 planned libraries for this district, and each library is about 1000 books. It was comforting to see dozens of large freshly-arrived USPS canvas shipping bags in their storage



room. The bags are filled with books that will be distributed to the area's primary schools. Our book donations are still arriving daily. At an evening PTA reception in honor of the African Library Project, our hosts followed their formal introductions and speeches with joyful and spontaneous singing, dancing and ululating. It was fun and inspiring, and we joined in, equally happy to be celebrating the birth of so many libraries in Botswana with such dedicated

parents and educators.

The next morning, our delegation visited our first school, Mokgadi Primary School. Mokgadi Primary's 500 students and many parents welcomed our little microbus. Our family sat as honored guests on a stage where we both listened to and gave our own speeches. My husband Steve and our teenagers, Ben (17) and Mariah (13) gave short speeches, too, and they were gracious and eloquent. I talked about the importance of reading to realize your dreams and I told about the efforts of their U.S. partners, the children at Walter Hays Elementary School in Palo Alto, CA, to collect, sort, pack and ship books to them. Prayers and songs were followed by a tour of the colorful, well-organized library.

The tour was led by a dozen kids who had each memorized a speech describing a different area of the library (cultural corner, HIV/AIDs corner, computer corner complete with a non-working computer, Setswana section, Botswana section, reference section, etc.). Rita, the teacher-librarian, was rightfully proud of Mokgadi's library. I surprised myself by crying...tears of joy. I was so busy in the months before we went to Africa, I never stopped to consider how I might feel when I actually saw our libraries at work. I just knew it was important to go.

Following the all school assembly, we visited classrooms. Each class demonstrated how they are using the books. Form 1 (1st grade) sang the alphabet song, and each class thorough Form 6 displayed their talents. We heard reports about HIV/Aids, book reports, science experiments, research, and a couple of original plays. Then we watched as a large dance troupe of students, dressed in animal skins, performed an elaborate traditional dance outdoors.

Finally, we were given a tour by two sweet fourteen year old boys of the rondaval (traditional round hut) built by the Mokgadi PTA to hold their cultural education artifacts. The PTA plays an important role in the education of children, as they teach the students how to plow the field with an ox, how to make their national dish and the proper role of girls with their in-laws. Our libraries are giving these PTA volunteers an additional role as library assistants: they hold the library open, re-stock and repair books.

We spent the afternoon visiting Phutisutla Primary School (US Partner: St. Joseph School in Mechanicsburg, PA), also in the Kanye District. An honor guard of “drum majorettes” escorted us from our microbus to the stage of the all school assembly. As per protocol, we were introduced during short speeches to the school assembly. At this school, about 50 PTA members attended to show their gratitude for the library books and to enjoy the ceremony. Afterwards, we enjoyed our best meal in Botswana, a potluck which included mealie pap, the national dish (sort of like stiff mashed potatoes made of corn and served with a sauce), supplied by the PTA. We toured Phutisutla’s library and found that it was well organized, colorful, inviting, and clearly well used. In fact, it was so inviting that my son Ben promptly found a book and plopped down to read. Students showed us around the library and the principal gave us a tour of the grounds, including the gardens. The principal explained that Phutisutla Primary School supports about 50 children who are “double” orphans due to AIDS. The children grow crops at the school to help provide their own food.



A “theatrical pageant” produced by the children awaited our return. Some students had changed from their school uniforms into traditional garb, and they acted out a scene of villagers bringing baskets of grain and pots of beer to the chief of the village while singing traditional songs. A young boy who was playing the part of the chief created a big stir among the adults by partaking heartily of the villagers’ liquid offering. Then, to everyone’s amusement, he fined all the women in the audience who were breaking tribal law by wearing pants in the presence of the “Chief.” My daughter had to cough up some coins. The finale included a beautiful girl in leopard skins who was the daughter of the real local chief, presenting us with gifts (a basket and beer pot) as a symbolic thank you from the school for their library books.

Our experience in Botswana helped us to appreciate the huge challenges to building a literate society in which easy access to books is normal. Africa’s culture of oral tradition does not naturally support reading. Many people treat books as precious resources that must be protected under lock and key, not freely circulated and well used. Many communities just don’t have money for librarians, bookshelves or extra rooms for libraries. And security (keeping the books from walking off) can be a big issue among people who are not acculturated to the norms of a lending library.



At the same time, we have huge confidence that our 100 Libraries Project for Botswana is set up for success. The Botswana are pulling together on all levels to improve their educational systems. Botswana spends 30%

of its budget on education, a greater percentage than any other country in the world. While they have a long way to go to reduce high levels of poverty and HIV/AIDS rates, they have come a long way by introducing universal education. The African Library Project's partnership has encouraged them to include in their 2010 five-year plan a goal of building library buildings in their primary schools.

I am so proud of what our U.S. and Batswana partners are accomplishing together. I am grateful to our US partners for putting their faith in our ability to coordinate library projects. As my husband Steve says, "I can't imagine not having taken this trip!". It was amazingly productive for the African Library Project, and we remain enthusiastic about our progress to come.