

Daily Herald

Making good on a promise

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By: Corrine Hess, Daily Herald Staff Writer

Lake Zurich husband and wife start nonprofit to send books to schools in Africa

A promise to send books to a tiny school in Africa has turned into a 15,000-pound labor of love for a Lake Zurich couple.

During a trip to Tanzania in early 2004, Steve and Paulie Kutschat toured Longido Secondary School on the border of Kenya and noticed only a handful of books in the school's library.

"We were a little bit shocked and a lot surprised," Steve Kutschat said. "So I said, 'We'll get you books.'"

And they did.

As soon as they returned home, the Kutschats got to work contacting libraries and schools in Lake County and asking for their old books.

It worked. In June 2005, the Kutschats, with the help of several volunteers, sent 500 textbooks to Longido.

In December, several thousand more books, making up an entire curriculum, were sent to three other schools.

"We hope that all of this exposure helps these kids acquire a vision, goals and long-term hope for the future," Steve Kutschat said. "The world isn't that small, and a better Africa means a better world."

The couple have always been interested in education. Steve Kutschat, 64, is a former English teacher-turned-financial consultant, and Paulie Kutschat, 61, is a former music teacher who now teaches private piano lessons.

The first shipments have gone to Tanzania, located on the east coast of Africa. The Kutschats hope to expand their giving across eastern Africa.

In Tanzania, and many other African countries, the government stops providing education for children after primary school. Secondary schools are started in the communities, but libraries and textbooks are scarce because of the cost.

Paulie Kutschat said sending the books means striking a delicate balance between giving a gift and not imposing American culture on others.

"We don't want anyone to think we are trying to change who they are or their culture," she said.

This year, the Kutschats started Bookfriends International, a nonprofit organization, to continue collecting textbooks and shipping them across the ocean.

Last month, they bought an 18,000-square-foot warehouse on Rand Road in Wauconda to store the books. The book donations have been so great the quarters are becoming cramped.

So far, the Kutschats have funded the shipments themselves but are hoping to begin collecting donations. Each book costs 60 to 80 cents to send.

In the next few weeks, about 15,000 pounds of textbooks, encyclopedias and library books will be sent to eight more schools.

The Kutschats are planning another trip to Tanzania next year to visit the schools that have received books from Bookfriends.

Steve Kutschat is also planning to climb Mount Kilimanjaro again - the reason for the couple's first visit to Tanzania.

They are looking at Bookfriends International as something they can focus on in their retirement which is a few years off for both of them.

"I'm convinced we are still talented enough to make things happen," Steve Kutschat said. "And we can't live forever. But we want Bookfriends to live forever."

chess@dailyherald.com

Donate a book

To donate books or money for shipping and handling costs to Bookfriends International nonprofit organization:

*Log onto www.bookfriends.org

*Send donations to Bookfriends International; 1000 Rand Road #206; Wauconda, IL 60084

100 percent of all donations go to the care and shipping of books.

Source: Daily Herald Interviews

Photo: Caption below

During a trip to Tanzania, Steve and Paulie Kutschat noticed a lack of textbooks for schoolchildren. The Lake Zurich residents have collected used books from across Lake County and are storing them in a warehouse in Wauconda until they can be shipped.

STEVE LUNDY/slundy@dailyherald.com