

Used books open up a brand-new world for schoolkids in Africa

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Steve and Paulie Kutschat were shocked when they visited the library of a new school in Tanzania more than two years ago.

The East African school had hundreds of students but only about a dozen library books. The textbook situation was no better.

"We will get you books," promised Steve Kutschat, 63, a former English teacher turned financial adviser.

Paulie Kutschat, his wife of 13 years and a piano teacher, smiled and went along with her husband's impulsive gesture.

"I was like, Wow, how are we going to do that? but I didn't say anything," she said.

The Lake Zurich couple have since dedicated themselves to the task. They started a non-profit organization called Bookfriends International, which they hope to expand to other regions in the African continent.

They sent their first shipment--500 books--to Longido, Tanzania, in June 2004.

This month, their third shipment will be sent to eight schools in Tanzania. So far, it includes about 20,000 library books and textbooks.

Paulie Kutschat, 61, says the couple never pictured themselves sitting around during their retirement, which is still a few years away.

"Life is like that anyway," she said. "You have to envision things and step out of your comfort zone to make that happen."

They aren't strangers to ambitious goals. One of the main reasons they visited Tanzania was for Steve Kutschat to fulfill his dream of climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro.

When they got back home, they asked Wauconda schools for donations of excess textbooks in subjects such as science, English, world history and math. They received donations of books considered too old or out of date by U.S. school standards or whose bindings were frayed but usable. These are books that, in many cases, would have been thrown out.

The couple and some volunteers started out storing, doing inventory on and packing books in the Kutschat garage.

Word spread as they contacted other school districts. They even went to Iowa for a book pickup.

"There are a lot of textbooks that go to waste," Steve Kutschat said.

He said the government in Tanzania funds education up to the 5th grade, but beyond that, communities must pay for secondary education. Many communities struggle to meet basic needs.

Building a school is an accomplishment, but getting money for books--which are tremendously expensive in Africa--is often "out of reach for them," Steve Kutschat said.

Just the other day, the couple received this e-mail from the headmaster of Mnini Secondary School in Moshi, Tanzania:

"I learned with enthusiasm in your letter your intention to provide the school with textbooks. My school has a very big shortage of books for both teachers and students. The school runs a library with very few and outdated books. We would therefore be very much grateful to receive the books from you."

Six weeks ago, the couple moved the Bookfriends operation to a Wauconda warehouse. Books are stacked on pallets, and in some areas they seem to reach the ceiling.

Sitting in the warehouse, Steve Kutschat explained the root of his new passion.

"Once you are over there, you understand that they really only lack the opportunity," he said. "The students' bright, smiling faces are filled with intelligence."

"And very eager," added Paulie Kutschat.

"But without books, their ability to work is shortchanged," he continued.

When the Kutschats receive books, they sort them to make sure nothing that they deem inappropriate is sent. Every book gets a library card glued to the inside and a "Bookfriends" label. Textbooks get a large label that covers the names of previous book owners.

The library books are placed on shelves and categorized by subject. Each school gets a book from each of the different categories. About 20 to 30 textbooks are sent to each school.

The cost of a shipment, about \$8,000, covers the train ride to the East Coast, a long, slow boat ride to Europe and then on to another ship bound for Africa. Bookfriends pays for the shipping through donor contributions.

The group's volunteers come in all ages. The youngest place labels inside the book covers.

On a recent weekday, volunteer Anna Turner, 16, a junior at Lake Zurich High School, efficiently packed boxes full of books. She showed another volunteer, Kass Kappler of McHenry, how to tally the number of books and write the information on each box.

Paulie Kutschat was Turner's piano teacher.

"Like Mrs. Kutschat said, some people donate money and other things, but really, education is the most lasting," said Turner without stopping her work. "I think it's great that we're helping them and sending so many books."

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How to help

To donate books or money: Send to Bookfriends International, 1000 Rand Rd., Suite 206, Wauconda, IL 60084. The group says it is most in need of cash donations to help with the care, handling and shipping of books to Africa.

Volunteer opportunities: Go to www.bookfriends.org

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[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: PHOTO: Paulie Kutschat (center), a founder of Bookfriends International, gets help from volunteers Anna Turner (left) and Kass Kappler preparing books to be shipped to Africa. Tribune photo by David Trotman-Wilkins

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Abstract (Document Summary)

PHOTO; [Paulie Kutschat] (center), a founder of Bookfriends International, gets help from volunteers [Anna Turner] and [Kass Kappler] preparing books to be shipped to Africa. Tribune photo by David Trotman-Wilkins

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