

The Columns

HUMANITY

Reading Frenzy

Chris Bradshaw '75 spawns a movement with the African Library Project

BY ABBE WRIGHT '07

FINDING A WAY TO IMPACT THOUSANDS OF LIVES wasn't part of the plan when Chris Noel Bradshaw '75 went back to Africa in 2004. The objective then was much simpler: enjoy an adventurous vacation with her husband, Steve Levin, and their children, Ben and Mariah (then 14 and 10, respectively). She wanted to introduce her children, whom she had been homeschooling, to the continent that she fell in love with during her college years. The plan was to, among other things, canoe down the Zambezi River, camp amidst lions and elephants, ride elephants in Zimbabwe, and—for mom and dad—bungee jump off the Victoria Falls Bridge.

It was during the ponytrekking stretch of their trip, through the tiny mountain kingdom of Lesotho, that Bradshaw had her epiphany. Riding through a thick, stifling heat and clouds of red dust kicked up by the horses' hooves, the family and their guide had crested yet another hill to gaze upon yet another village burdened by impoverished conditions. Bradshaw looked at her son, who was voraciously devouring a book atop his plodding steed, and the thought

occurred to her. She asked their guide if there were any libraries in Lesotho. The guide smiled and slowly replied, "I think there is one in the capital." Within that response was the answer she had been seeking for three decades.

As a sociology major, Bradshaw spent her junior year at Fourah Bay College, part of the University of Sierra Leone. There she studied African religion, law, and literature and traveled alone through western and central Africa, better acquainting herself with African traditions, as well as seeing firsthand the conditions the African people endured. Post-graduation, Bradshaw continued her travels and found herself deeply affected by Africa's poverty and the socioeconomic backsliding that seemed to be so prevalent. "At 21, I didn't know what I could do to help," says Bradshaw, who, between college and children, was a YMCA camp executive in Indiana, North Carolina, and California. "But at 54, I have the resources to be able to do something. I was sick of feeling overwhelmed."

And so, on this vacation, and upon learning of the tiny nation's solitary library, Bradshaw considered how Africa, where four out of every ten people cannot read or write, suffers from the highest illiteracy rate in the world. She then

considered the vast amount of books that hit American landfills or are otherwise no longer used. She had previously contemplated building a school in Africa, but when they arrived in the village of Malealea, she asked if the residents had ever thought about a library. Representatives of the Community Foundation, who had developed several successful local projects like a water reservoir and a soccer field, replied that they had always wanted a public library but just had no idea how to get books. Bradshaw said she would find a way, and the seeds of her African Library Project were planted.

When Bradshaw and her family returned to their home in Portola Valley, Calif., she emailed the Community Foundation's liaison in South Africa in order to set up shipping lines for donated books. She learned that the Lesotho villagers were already half-finished building the structure for their future library. The Community Foundation decided to assign its development to a Peace Corps volunteer who was to arrive in the next two months. She was, as Bradshaw deems, "a little miracle," and happened to be a retired librarian who created a technical library manual on how to set-up and run libraries in developing countries. Instead of setting up the one library, she set up four and a "donkey library"—literally, a collection of books on the back of a donkey that delivers them throughout the Malealea Valley.

Under each arrangement, the respective communities must provide the space, shelving, and staff—typically volunteers—for their libraries, who are trained by Peace Corps volunteers about what a library is and how it functions. Bradshaw chuckles as she says, "We faced a lot of challenges teaching about the unfamiliarities of a library, like re-shelving the books with their spines facing out" but with the help of the manual, the process has become fairly formulaic, with valuable assistance coming from the School of Library Science at the University of Botswana.

Bradshaw, whose mantra has become "Do it small first, learn it well, then expand," started the U.S.-based supply-side of the effort by managing book collections by herself. She then began to find librarians and school principals who were willing to spearhead drives in local schools and churches. She says the African Library Project helps solve a problem for Americans who want to do something, but just don't know what to do. "We value our books, but we just don't use them. We read them once and then they sit on a shelf," she says. People were thrilled to donate their books to a worthy cause.



Chris Bradshaw celebrates at a book-packing party with book drive organizers Amanda Breslauer, Hannah Blumen-Green, and Madison Norman, who at nine and ten years old collected more than 4,000 books—an African Library Project record and enough to establish four libraries.



In Africa, Bradshaw personally established two early libraries in Zimbabwe and Zambia, then she started to look for an “on-the-ground” partner to implement and expand her work. She was originally reluctant to approach the Peace Corps because of its cumbersome bureaucracy, but she eventually connected with the right people, and it has proven to be a great partnership. This enabled her to focus on expanding the African Library Project’s larger sphere of influence.

A friend volunteered to help her develop a website—www.africanlibraryproject.org—which Bradshaw credits for taking the Project to an international level. Not only did it enable her to broadly spread the message—resulting in drives in places like Canada and Puerto Rico—it also provided an easier means for Africans to contact the Project. On a typical week, she hears from three or four villages interested in establishing their own library.

In October of 2005, in order to maximize the organization’s potential impact, Bradshaw developed a board of directors comprised largely of librarians from local schools, as well as a former Peace Corps volunteer who had set up libraries in Africa that had failed. “She provided a strong voice about sustainability,” Bradshaw says, “proving that the people you surround yourself with in the beginning really shape your organization.”

To date, the African Library Project has helped establish nearly 100 libraries. Much of the Project’s model consists of connecting American schools, churches and scout troops with communities in Africa who are interested in starting a library. Along with book drives, American organizations

raise money to ship the books directly, as well as educate the public about poverty and illiteracy in Africa. The process becomes hands-on for children who are actively involved in donating their old books to send to their peers in Africa and promotes great lessons about leadership and recycling, helping kids to learn that what is considered an excess resource here is a precious treasure in Africa.

Bradshaw, who was awarded the Bay Area Jefferson Award for Public Service in July 2006, has many more hopes and goals for the future of the African Library Project. She’s proud of the fact that as a “shoestring organization,” all of the Project’s work has been accomplished for under \$5,000. But she wants to raise the funds—about \$20,000—to be able to put a set of 24 illustrated children’s books about HIV/AIDS into each library. She also hopes that every library will one day have a small but important native language section, so that children who are learning to read can do so both in English and their native tongues. She dreams of starting thousands of libraries all over sub-Saharan Africa, considering education to be the greatest tool for self-sustainment and upward mobility, with literacy being the number one tool out of poverty. For Bradshaw, this is how she has made a difference in the lives of African people. “Each library is unique to its village,” she says. “Some buildings are round with thatched roofs and mud floors, some are cinder-block walled, connected to a school, and some are repaired abandoned buildings in the center of a village. I love that they’re all different, but each library works for its people. That’s what matters.”

These three Basutho boys were among the first to reap the benefits of the African Library Project at its initial establishment in Malealea, Lesotho. Since then, nearly 100 more libraries have been set up in villages across sub-Saharan Africa.