



May 20, 2005 | Global Literacy Project, Inc. | P.O. Box 228 | New Brunswick | NJ 08903-0228



Thelma H. Tate – A Tribute

by Edward Ramsamy

Thelma H. Tate, coordinator of Global Outreach Services for the New Brunswick Libraries of Rutgers University and former executive member of the Center for African Studies, passed away on May 20, 2005 after a year-long battle with cancer. Thelma began her long and dedicated career as a librarian at Douglass College in 1970 and served in various capacities in the University library system. In 2003, she delivered the prestigious Jean E. Coleman Outreach Lecture of the American Library Association (ALA). This lecture series is sponsored by the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) of the ALA as a tribute to the work of Jean E. Coleman (the first director of OLOS) to ensure that all citizens, particularly Native Americans and

adult learners have access to high quality library services. Thelma Tate was invited to deliver the lecture in recognition for her own work in ensuring that disadvantaged communities have equity of access to the tools of literacy.

At the Coleman lecture, Thelma emphasized that due to the lack of adequate access to information, many citizens suffer from a “literacy anemia” that diminishes their productive power. This is especially true of disadvantaged communities, Thelma noted. She went on to consider the potential for productivity among those she called the “un-served and underserved” members of our society. How staggering her observations were on the lack of services to new and non-readers, those who are geographically isolated, persons with disabilities, the rural and urban poor, and all those who were struggling with various disadvantages! Thelma dedicated the last years of her life to addressing this challenge directly. She designed initiatives that used creative ideas from around the world to assess existing literacy programs and to develop new ones to effectively serve the needs of diverse populations.

I had the privilege of working with Thelma Tate over the past five years for the Global Literacy Project, or GLP as we are known. The Global Literacy Project, of which I am Secretary, consists of group of Rutgers’ faculty, staff, and students, as well as members from the surrounding community, who are committed to addressing the fact that in spite of great technological advances of our times, much of the world’s population still does not have access to the basic tools of literacy. For instance, Many rural areas of the developing world do not have access to libraries or books, let alone computers or internet access. Dr. Olubayi Olubayi, founder and President of the Global Literacy Project, started working with Thelma since GLP’s inception in 1999 given the numerous initiatives Thelma had already taken in expanding and promoting literacy.

So far, with Thelma’s help, GLP has been able to ship more than 2 million books to locations in Ghana, Swaziland, Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, in Africa, as well as Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean. One of our most significant donations was to the Jomo Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya. As Rutgers University was rationalizing its book collections among the various libraries, Thelma was able to arrange for a complete set of Chemical abstracts to be donated to Jomo Kenyatta through the Global

Literacy Project. In recognition of this contribution, Jomo Kenyatta University has established ten full scholarships spanning the next ten years, targeting students from poor communities in rural Kenya.

The Thelma I knew and deeply admired was dedicated to everything she did and she brought that energy into GLP as well. She broadened our scope through the networks she helped us to build and enabled us to imagine literacy in ways that we had not considered before. If the poet John Donne reminded us that “no man is an island unto himself,” Thelma showed us how



the tools of literacy can connect us to the humanity of others. Now, Thelma Tate wasn't simply a talker. She walked the walk too, as they say. A great part of GLP's work involves the demanding physical labor of packing, boxing and carrying heavy boxes of books. Whether it was mid-winter, mid-summer, rain, wind, or shine, Thelma was always there to help us with those boxes, often putting us younger folk to shame. She often committed her own funds for shipment and storage costs on occasions when funds needed to be raised quickly.

On May 7, 2005 I picked up Thelma's brother, Mr. Herman Horn, at Newark's Penn Station. He had just arrived after a 30 hour bus trip from Alabama to come and see his “baby sister” Thelma. By then, Thelma had already been fighting cancer for about a year, but she was one of those people who never burdened others with their troubles. In her suffering, it seems that she had not informed her family in Alabama of how seriously ill she was. Therefore, a few weeks ago, after visiting her at Mulenburg Hospital in Plainfield, Dr. Olubayi and I called Mr. Horn to urge him to come visit Thelma on behalf of her family in Alabama. While talking with Thelma's brother on the trip back from Newark and over the past few of weeks, I learned more about Thelma's life that made me admire her even more. I learned about the challenges she faced growing up in the Jim Crow south and I learned how her rich history, her loving family, the church, and the broader community enabled her to triumph in spite of the absurdities of slavery, segregation, and racism. Thelma was able to draw upon her community's support to obtain an education and a career in the North, where she built a new life with her husband and two sons. I then understood why literacy, education, and democracy were so important to Thelma. She exemplified these ideals in all the outreach work she did as librarian and educator. Embodying the spirit of giving, she gave the gift of literacy to many.