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Librarian is Honored by Global Literacy Project

February 1, 2008

After traveling to South Africa to help establish a new library, Short Hills Library Director Ann D'Innocenzo has been honored with the "Librarian of the Year Award" from the Global Literacy Project (GLP), Inc. This non-profit charity organization based in New Jersey was founded to spread community-based literacy initiatives to Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean. The Honorable Fikile Magubane, South African Consul General to New York, joined GLP in presenting the award in December 2007. It is given every year to a librarian demonstrating courage, creativity, and energy in bringing tools of literacy to a large group of people.

D'Innocenzo's volunteer work during the summer of 2007 was focused on both a new library in Randfontein—a town west of Johannesburg—and a system that categorizes books with color-coding, a system that will be used in future libraries.

As an additional highlight, D'Innocenzo created pen pals. Before the trip, she asked the Pingry students in kindergarten through grade 5 to write letters to the South African students at the Zuurbekom School—most of whom had never received a letter—and the letters were accompanied by photographs of the Pingry students. The other students wrote back, and the messages continue.

"Our students were very excited to receive their letters and to establish pen pal relationships with students living so far away. It has been a great opportunity to develop global awareness in our students and to discuss cultural, economic, and geographic similarities and differences," D'Innocenzo says.

Pingry parent Denise Vanech, who traveled to South Africa as a volunteer, relates the emotion of watching the local children's excitement from discovering books that might otherwise have been discarded. "Tears came to my eyes as I watched these children sitting on the floor with their South African peers sharing the joy of reading," she says.

Overall, the Pingry students, volunteers, and administrators were welcomed as friends by local teachers, students, and officials, and they received an in-depth look at South African culture and history.



PINGRY

THE PINGRY REVIEW

WINTER 2008

Sharing the Magic

By Ann D'Innocenzo, Short Hills Library Director

They gathered around a small table under the intense South African midday sun to share a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. The group of children with paint in their hair, red clay dirt on their faces, and stick-on colored dots hanging from their clothes was exhausted but never complained about the long days of lugging heavy boxes across the dusty paths and unloading, labeling, and organizing thousands of books. These remarkable students were driven by their mission that had begun many months before to bring books and a library to the children in a rural community in South Africa.

It all started less than a year ago in December 2006, when Emma Carver, Form V, and her mother Anne DeLaney '79 met the representatives of a New Jersey based non-profit organization, the Global Literacy Project (GLP), by chance while performing community service for Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). They learned that the GLP was founded for the purpose of fostering community-based literacy initiatives throughout Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean. Emma and her siblings, Chloe (Form III), and Sean and Reeve (Grade 6), were inspired by the GLP mission and decided to start a book drive for one of GLP's target sites in South Africa.

Emma took the idea of a book drive to her friends and organized a meeting at her home for students and interested parents. By February 2007, the Carvers, Neeraj Shekhar and his parents, and friends had already collected 17,000 books towards their goal of 20,000 at



Packing books at Pingry



A warm welcome from the community and local officials as the GLP group unloads container

the two Pingry campuses and decided to open the book drive to the surrounding community. Support grew as Christina Vanech (Form V); Ross Millard '07; the Steele family; and other Pingry friends, teammates, and members of communities from across Northern New Jersey joined the effort. Nat Conard, Pingry Headmaster, donated the use of an unused classroom in Martinsville to sort and pack the books. Mike Virzi, director of facilities, and his staff transported more than 14 pallets of books to a warehouse where they were stored and later shipped via cargo container to South Africa.

On February 24, 2007 Emma, Chloe, and Christina organized more than 100 student volunteers, including the entire Peer Leadership group, to sort, count, and pack the books under the direction of faculty members. The students' devotion and enthusiasm were infectious. Word-of-mouth and the publicity of the February event further inspired students at other schools and churches to run book drives for the cause. Throughout New Jersey, close to 50 schools, churches, and civic organizations from five counties got involved. By the end of May, the students nearly tripled their initial goal and went

on to collect more than 57,000 books. Enough books were shipped to not only fill the new library but also to distribute thousands of books to the schools in rural areas outside of Johannesburg.



The library "before"

In the Lower School, I, as the school librarian, worked directly with my students to write pen pal letters to give to the children in South Africa and took many pictures of my students to present with the letters. I also began developing a library system for a community unfamiliar with the concept of lending and borrowing books and devised a color-coded cataloging system that would also be used as a model for other libraries in South Africa. Soon, the group was no longer satisfied just to collect and ship the books to a distant country and



The group in the new Thelma Tate Library

decided to join the Carvers on their trip to South Africa in August 2007 to build a library to house these books.

On August 2, ten middle school and high school students, Elizabeth Moore '07 and Ross Millard '07, Pingry Director of Facilities Mike Virzi, and I joined fourteen volunteers including Dr. Obabai and Mr. Thomas from GLP for the long flight to Johannesburg, South Africa where we spent more than two weeks visiting schools and creating a community library and learning center. Thanks to the relationships GLP had previously formed there, we were welcomed by the teachers, students, church members, and even local officials as special guests and friends and learned firsthand about the South African history and culture. Our team worked long days on the renovation of an old storage building that had sat unused for several years. Our mission was to convert this building into a library to be used by the children and adults of the Randfontein area. Our team hauled books from the cargo container to an old garage where the children and adults worked side-by-side color-coding thousands of books with stick-on dots in order to divide them into different categories and grade levels to make it easier for the

South African children to use their new library. Children and adults rolled paint on the building, constructed shelves for the books, made signs, and finally shelved 4,000 books using the simple, colored dot system that I had devised. After several days of work, we were ready to open the library and the local children poured in and scooped up the books, later sitting with us on the floor sharing the magic of reading.



Christina Vanech, Form V, unloading books

Meanwhile, two Pingry parents and I had the rare opportunity to spend a full day at the Zuurbekom School working directly with the students and teachers on the Pen Pal Project that I had started in the spring at the Lower School. For most of the students, this was the first letter they had ever received and they wrote letters back to our Pingry students telling them

of their love for them (even though they had never met them), their interest in sports, and about their families. We learned that, although there are enormous differences in the lives of our students and those of the Zuurbekom students, there is still a core commonality of family and friendship that can be shared. We also learned that most of the children from this school live in what are known as "shanty towns," enormous areas consisting of one-room corrugated metal structures without heat or electricity, that they eat only one meal a day, and have never had the opportunity to own or read a book, learning to read only through rote memorization and drilling.

And now, less than a year from Emma and Anne's first encounter with the Global Literacy Project, Emma, Christina, and Chloe have formed a "GLP Club" at the Upper School with advisor Pat Lionetti with the mission of continuing the work they started and strengthening the connections they made in South Africa. Neeraj Shekhar and Sean and Reeve Carver are planning to do the same in the Middle School with the help of Mike Virzi and Janaky Ramaswamy, and I am continuing the relationship between the Pingry and Zuurbekom Schools through the Pen Pal Project at the Lower School.

In addition to the bonds that were forged between all the participants in our group, the most indelible image of our journey is of the day we distributed thousands of books to thousands of children. The students stood patiently in perfect lines by grade. After a long wait, the books arrived and we gave one to each child. They thanked and hugged us, and some even bowed. Later that afternoon, from the windows of our bus, we saw clusters of children clutching their precious opened books, reading as they walked on the dusty red clay paths alongside the road, reading as they walked the long trek home to their shanty town.

For more information on GLP and the book drive, visit www.glpinc.org.