

Daily Herald

Couple crosses borders for sake of books, betterment for the world

Posted Sunday February 25, 2007

By: Sarah Long, Director of the North Suburban Library System

Steve Kutschat wanted to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro. He wasn't a mountain climber and he had never been to East Africa or Tanzania, where Mount Kilimanjaro is located.

"It was just a long-held dream," Kutschat said.

In January, 2004, Kutschat and his wife, Paulie, boarded a flight bound for Kilimanjaro International airport.

Kutschat then spent a week on the mountain.

"I was accompanied on this trek by a guide, two porters and a cook. There were times when I wasn't sure that I would make it. It was very difficult, but also very fulfilling."

Meanwhile, Paulie, a teacher by training, volunteered at a Maasai girls' secondary school. She found students so committed to learning and to getting their education. Knowing that their time left after Steve came down from the mountain was just one week, Paulie arranged for that time to be spent with a native family who would show them additional schools in northern Tanzania. They found more eager students and bare book shelves. Upon seeing the extreme need for books written in English, Steve and Paulie promised to send them books.

The Kutschats began to formulate their plan on the long plane ride home. When they returned they found many organizations willing to contribute the kinds of books they knew were needed. Typically, schools in our area get new textbooks every four to five years. The Kutschats began to gather textbooks from schools, and reference books and leisure reading books from libraries, individuals and publishers.

Now, three years later, their organization, Bookfriends International, has legal status as a not-for-profit public foundation and, together with many volunteers and financial contributors, is dedicated to providing solutions for Africa's educational needs.

The Bookfriends warehouse in Wauconda carries an organized inventory of up to 30,000 books. This allows them to fulfill the specific needs of individual schools. After communicating with the recipient schools, the correct numbers of textbooks are prepared, along with 200 to 300 library books; a complete package for each school.

To date, there are more than 20 schools and over 10,000 students using Bookfriends books daily. The list of schools still wanting and needing books is lengthy. It is nearly impossible for countries with average wages of \$1 to \$3 per day to provide textbooks which cost \$50 to \$100 per copy. A container of 18,000 books for 10 schools costs Bookfriends \$8,000 in shipping expense, about 50 cents per book. And yet, the schools receive these books at no cost to them.

The effort is being recognized by contacts in several other countries in Africa. The need is great, the requests are urgent. Books are integral to education processes, and ultimately, education offers hope for individuals, and stability and stronger development for African countries.

Bookfriends International is growing and you can help. Bookfriends is looking for a larger warehouse. Funding to support shipments is critical, as are more books and

volunteers. The group has enjoyed the help from Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, church groups, families and many individuals, doing all the various jobs to sort and prepare books for shipment. It is a labor of love for many, and kids especially get excited about helping other children across the world. Best of all, volunteers can take pride in helping to educate African children. The Kutschats unqualifyingly state: "We believe that as a result, these children will grow up to be better citizens who will expect good government from their leaders. Helping Bookfriends is an opportunity to help build a better world."

For information, visit www.bookfriends.org or call 847-726-8776.