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A novel approach

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WAUCONDA – it would take a lifetime for Steve and Paulie Kutschat to read everything in this room.

The Lake Zurich married couple are standing in the middle of a warehouse in Wauconda, surrounded by the likes of Henry Thoreau, Ananse the Spider, The Baby-sitter's Club and Shamu. Books seem to be pouring out of the walls of the warehouse. A pile of novels weigh down a box. A herd of textbooks line the walls. And shelving units are filled to the point that some books literally are being squeezed out.

The Kutschats are most proud of the books you can't see, though, the ones stacked in a box, grouped with other boxes in a pallet, and waiting to be picked up by DHL to be shipped to Africa. For four years, the Kutschats have headed Bookfriends International, a nonprofit organization they founded that provides books to secondary schools in the east African county of Tanzania. It started with a sight-seeing trip to Kilimanjaro in January 2004 and has resulted in 43 schools in Tanzania receiving thousands of books.

"We just think of it as something that we think should be done," Steve said. "We think it should be done a lot more than it is. But we're just doing our part."

The couple decided to do their part after taking a tour of schools across Tanzania after Steve had climbed Kilimanjaro.

The Kutschats were shocked at the dearth of books in the schools.

"It's so obvious what the need is," Steve said. "They don't have any [books]. And the kids are so eager. They're such bright kids and they're so fun. They just need to have a chance."

Luckily, America is the land of surplus, and that includes books.

"Rather than grind these up for fodder or recycling or just simply throwing them away," Steve said, "it's pretty important in our view and in a lot of people's views

that we just find a way to transfer them from America to where they're needed in places like Africa."

After returning from Africa, the Kutschats immediately set to work collecting books – with the first batch coming from Wauconda Middle School – and they had the first container ready to go in six months.

The couple started the process in their garage, but quickly outgrew that space. Bookfriends International now is comprised of the main warehouse in Wauconda, a storage unit in Wauconda that holds 11,000 books and donated space in Lakemoor that hold 15,000 books. And that's still not enough. They're looking for a new warehouse in hopes that more space would allow several projects to go on at same time. Right now, about three to four containers are sent out each year.

The 10 pallets waiting in the warehouse soon will be shipped across the Atlantic Ocean by boat. That's 16,000 to 20,000 books at a whopping cost of \$9,000.

"It takes a lot of money to make this work," said Steve, who is a financial planner. "But, on the other hand, when you talk about the efficiency of a dollar, then that one dollar sends two books over there, and that's a pretty good deal."

Of course, none of this would be possible without the volunteers who donate the books, sort the books to make sure they are appropriate, pack the books and stack the books. And that's not even including those who have donated money to make shipping them possible.

"This is not ours," Steve said. "This belongs to the volunteers."

Paulie said that about 20 families volunteer on a regular basis and that Scouts and church groups make their way to the warehouse quite often, as well.

"It's an opportunity for families who may ordinarily never work together to find out how to work together for the benefit of somebody else," Steve said. "And the fact that their working together benefits a lot of kids overseas is an added benefit."

And there are benefits for the volunteers as well. "We had a volunteer say awhile back that she could find no other way that one American can make such a big difference to so many people in another country," Steve said.

The Kutschats will get a chance to see that difference firsthand within a year. They are planning on going back to Tanzania next January to visit the schools and libraries whose shelves they've helped fill.

"People in this country need to realize that since the world is getting ever smaller, that a continent that's across the ocean in Africa is more important to us now

than ever,” Steve said. “And a peaceful Africa, an economically viable Africa, can contribute in very big ways to peace in the world and to the security of all nations involved.”

How to help

Contact Bookfriends International at 847-726-8776 or visit the website at www.bookfriends.org The foundation is looking for volunteers and monetary donations.