

Helping Our Youngsters Reach for the Sky . . .



Library Project Transforming Schools and Communities

By a Correspondent

'Children who learn to read fluently and well begin to take flight into whole new worlds as effortlessly as young birds take to the sky.' So said the famous American educator William James back in the 1800s

But his words are as true today

and should inspire all of us to make sure that books get into the hands of the younger generation. This is a particular challenge in Kenya, where the reality is that around 98% of primary schools in Kenya have no libraries and neither do most high schools.

Knowledge Empowers Youth -

KEY for short - is one of many organizations taking up the challenge. An initiative of Rita and Charles Field-Marsham, the pioneering project has established 20 libraries in Kenya, spread across seven counties: Elgeyo Marakwet, Isiolo, Lamu, Narok, Nairobi, Kiambu, Taita Taveta. They have

also now expanded into Tanzania, with a library in a village adjacent to Buzwagi gold mine. Altogether the libraries serve over 13,000 students.

But it is not just the children who are benefiting. As KEY chief executive, Rita Field-Marsham explains: “Our libraries develop into community hubs, meeting places, and engines of community engagement. Because they are sources of relevant information, they provide support for community and religious leaders, local health care workers, families, professionals and members of the community.”

She added: “Getting the books and other materials to remote locations can be challenging and we are grateful to the assistance of Air Kenya, who have helped with various airlifts, most notably to Lewa Downs in Isiolo county and to Lamu.”

In common with the other KEY libraries, the impact at both locations has been dramatic, both in terms of facilities and the enhanced performance of the children themselves.

Take the example of William, who attends Lewa Primary. Every night he sleeps, next to the cows that he must watch over, in a makeshift tent of recycled plastic, while his nomadic family ranges with the larger herd. Every night William reads books he has borrowed from the KEY library by firelight. Thanks to his voracious reading he recently graduated top of his class with a national exam KCPE 59.78% higher than the class mean score.

The success is echoed at Shella Primary School in Lamu. When the exam results were announced not only did the school improve its mean score, but actually set a new record since getting a library, jumping from



233 in 2014 to 300.5 in 2015. The head teacher said the KEY Library allowed the pupils to improve their performance not only in English, but across all subjects.

KEY program manager, Nicola Milnes, commented: “Since the library was established, Bright Girls High School has produced the first

female student to receive an A in the district.”

Recently KEY extended its activities of setting up much needed libraries to Kakuma Refugee Camp in north-western Kenya, near the South-Sudanese border, where it will support the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the



Lutheran World Foundation work for refugees.

Ms Field-Marsham explains that, based on extensive field research, KEY has developed three turnkey library models, ranging in cost from USD 25,000 for a container library to USD 120,000 for a new-build library.

The libraries start with 1,500-curated books that are customized to community priorities, curriculum support, teachers' support, learning opportunities, student reading levels and interests.

They add technology if the school has the resources to support it recognizing that effective use of information and web-based

information can only be achieved when a child has attained a basic level of proficiency in reading.

Their success has generated demand from other organizations to implement libraries for them. These include M-Pesa Foundation, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, Masai Wilderness Trust and Free the Children.

To keep costs to a minimum, KEY brings together the required resources, including project management, community participation, field experts, Kenyan student volunteers and crew, to

customize each library based on the school's needs.

Ms. Field-Marsham explains: "With support from an experienced board of advisors, significant discounts from local and international publishers, and partnerships with design firms, consultants and specialists, we keep to this low-cost model.

"The kind cooperation of Air Kenya in airlifting books to remote destinations has also helped us considerably to keep expenses down.

"The costs of the project therefore only reflect the resources that are actually required for the library."

For more information visit: www.knowledgeempoweringyouth.org