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CAMBRIDGE

### A class in giving, by the book

In Uganda, teacher spreads the word

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As a child growing up in exile in Kenya, Racheal Adriko's grandmother always told her: "Leave every place better than you found it."

Years later, the teenaged Adriko, who had returned to her native Uganda could not see any way to make good on that wisdom in a country still torn apart from 10 years of civil war.

So she left for college in America. It wasn't until almost a decade later that Adriko — now married and teaching kindergarten at the Martin Luther King Jr. School in Cambridge — finally found something she could give back to the tiny Ugandan village she still calls home.

Inspiration arrived in the form of a cardboard box that showed up one day outside one of her school's classrooms with a sign: "Free Books."

"I knew that teachers back in Uganda were really struggling to get by without even the basics," said Adriko, 29. "In some places, the ratio was something like one teacher to 200 kids."

Adriko grew more and more frustrated watching that box of free books sit untouched, week after week. Finally, she just scooped the books up herself — and then kept at it. By the time she and her husband, Richard Spillberg, were ready to make their next trip back to Uganda last December, Adriko had collected some 1,000 books for her village from friends, acquaintances, and co-workers.

The timing was critical: Uganda had recently implemented the country's first program of free primary education, and schools were



Teacher Racheal Adriko at Martin Luther King, Jr. School in Cambridge with some children who helped her collect books to donate to her native Uganda.

being bombarded with students, the vast majority of whom could barely read.

"As an African child, you're taught that you have a purpose in the world; that you're here to make a difference," she said. "I'm a teacher myself. So, when this came together, I really felt like my purpose was found."

Of course, her village of Arua was delighted, she says — and eager to spread their new literary wealth around.

A few weeks before Adriko's arrival, one of the village elders had offered a donation of a spare bicycle; another volunteered to take the donated books to neighboring communities. The strategy is now widely touted in this country as Uganda's first (and only) "mobile bicycle library." Most weeks, said Adriko, the elder on his bicycle covers about 10 miles.

"There is an African saying: 'If you are learned, you will find life.'"

Her husband, a South Shore native who made his first trip to Uganda after he and Adriko were married to make a traditional payment of bulls, cows, and sheep in exchange for his new bride, said,

"If you're going to go to Africa, you're going to be exposed to a lot of new things."

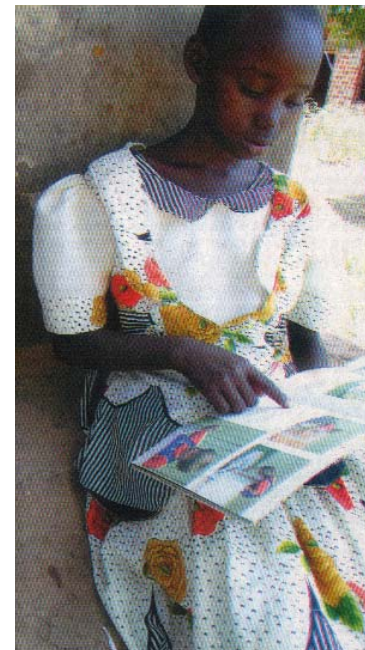
These days, Adriko spends a lot of time helping her class of kindergartners understand what it's like to grow up where home is a grass-roofed mud hut and books are a rare luxury.

Once the children went a whole day with only one book, so they could see how it felt to have to share. Another time, Adriko showed them the film she and Spillberg made to document the books' arrival in her village.

The film is resplendent with bright blue African skies, deep green mango trees, and smiling faces. But, Adriko remembered, one of her students noticed that many of the children in it were not wearing shoes.

"If you could only buy either shoes or food, which would you choose?" Adriko asked in response.

The boy thought for a moment, she recalled, then came back with a question of his own.



Racheal Adriko took these pictures in December 2004 when she brought 1,000 books she had collected from friends, acquaintances, and co-workers to her home village of Arua in Uganda. Her timing was impeccable: Uganda had recently established free primary education, and schools were being bombarded with students, the vast majority of whom could barely read.



Gesturing toward the box the class was busily filling with more books for Uganda's mobile bicycle library, he asked, could he and his friends put in some shoes, too?