

The Providence Journal

METRO EDITION

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 25, 2005

Book value



Rachael Adriko Spillberg, of Providence, will travel next month to her hometown of Arua, Uganda to deliver 5,000 books to schoolchildren who regard a book as a cherished possession.

BY LINDA BORG
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — There is an old African saying that girls pave the way between two cultures.

Rachel Adriko Spillberg, an African woman who was born into privilege in a country torn apart by civil war, says it is her obligation to give something back.

On Dec. 26, she will travel to her hometown of Arua, a rural village in Uganda, to deliver 5,000 books to a region where universal literacy is more a promise than a reality.

From there, one of the villagers will travel by bicycle to deliver the gift of literacy to hundreds of schoolchildren in the country's northwest corner.

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*My time to give back,
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Villagers to receive the gift of literacy

Spillberg, who lives in the Fox Point neighborhood, realizes that her contribution is small, a drop in the bucket. But she hopes that the ripple effects from her books will travel well beyond Arua.

"This is my time," she says, "My time to give back, to listen, to be part of a team to support literacy education in Africa."

SPILLBERG'S FAMILY lived in Uganda during the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin. Her father was a professor who had been educated in Europe.

In 1974, Amin got wind of plans to overthrow his government.

The seditious letter was supposedly traced back to the university where Spillberg's father worked. Fearing reprisals, the family fled across the border to Kenya.

When Spillberg was in seventh grade, her family returned to Uganda, but it was not an easy time. The Ugandan people were scarred by 10 years of bloody civil war. People were frightened and distrustful.

An aunt urged Spillberg — by then, a rebellious teenager — to get out of Africa and move to America.

She wound up going to Suffolk University, in Boston.

After graduation, Spillberg began teaching at the Martin Luther King Jr. School, a public elementary school in Cambridge, Mass. It was there that she met her husband, Richard, a guitarist and music producer.

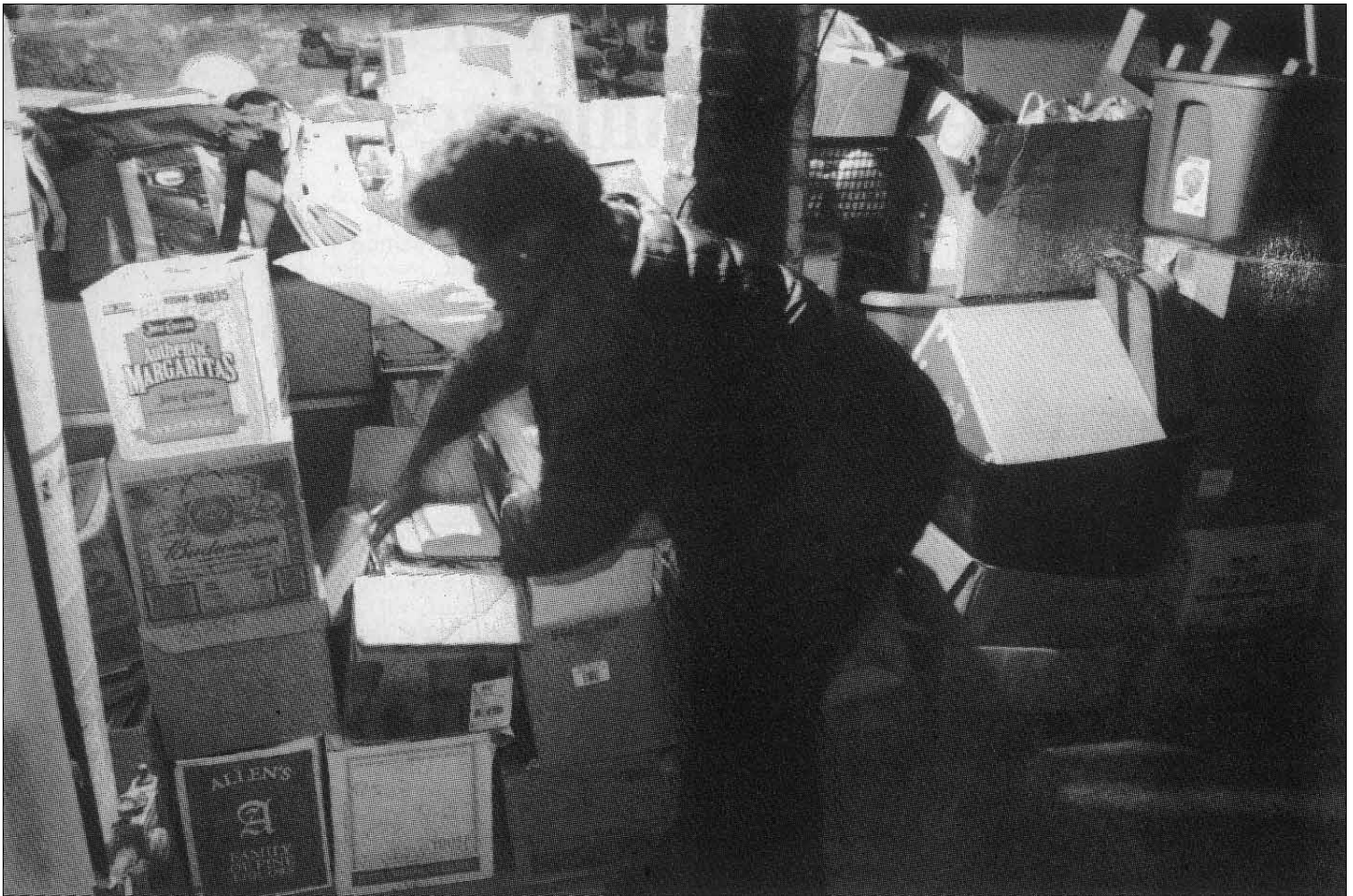
One day, Spillberg walked into her school library and saw a sign that said "Free Books."

She paused and thought, "Why not take these books back to Africa?"

She decided to teach her kindergarten class about Africa. During one lesson, she removed every book from the classroom and asked her students to share the same book, just as the children of Uganda do.

They hated it, but they were also stunned to learn that so many children had so little.

Spillberg launched her book drive, tapping colleagues and friends for donations. Before long, the pile had grown from 200 books to 500, from 500 to 1,000. Her husband's company, Lighthouse Medical Management of Providence, joined in the effort; it later shipped 600 books to Africa.



Rachael Adriko Spillberg, sorts some of the books she's boxed in the basement of her Providence home. She hopes to deliver 5,000 books to children in her hometown of Arua, Uganda, on Dec. 26.

Meanwhile, Spillberg had asked her aunt to approach the village elders about starting a library in Arua.

They were delighted.

One of the elders said, "I think the books should be enjoyed by the people of other villages. I have a bicycle."

Another said, "I have a box to go on the back of the bicycle."

And a third said, "I know someone who will ride the bicycle."

LAST CHRISTMAS, Spillberg and her husband traveled to Uganda with their boxes of books.

Their first stop, on Dec. 26, was Vurra, where her entourage met with the villagers, most of whom are struggling to live with HIV.

"I could see the community dancing and swaying mango branches, the children dressed in their Sunday best," Spillberg recalled.

"We talked about AIDS and how it affected the village. From a teacher to a reverend to a mother of nine children, it was clear that the village had created a community where everyone had a role."

The grand finale was in Arua. As Spillberg approached, the entire vil-

lage turned out to bless the library and invoke the spirit of longevity. Ten-foot-long Akadinda xylophones and Adungu wind instruments were played, calling the villagers to celebrate.

"As the musicians carved the wood," Spillberg says, "I could see that my mission was a lot more important than I had thought."

The community began singing and dancing in unison, to welcome the arrival of the library. When Spillberg began handing out her books, the children lunged forward, their hands outstretched.

"It broke my heart," Spillberg says, "that in 2005, African children would be fighting for books as if they were food."

BECAUSE THESE children had never seen a library, Spillberg had to explain how one worked.

When the bell rings, she told them, bring the books back to me. But instead of giving the books back, the children ran for the hills.

Spillberg was stunned. She had never seen a child hide a book.

Then it dawned on her. After years

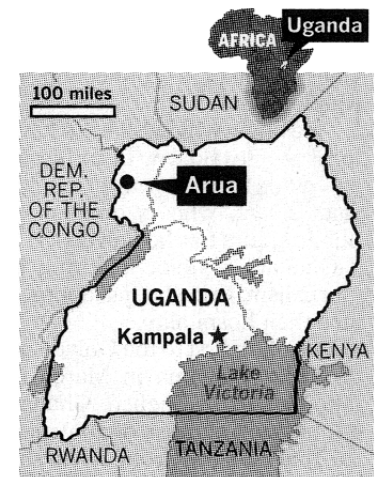
of civil unrest, families were used to soldiers taking everything they had. The children were simply trying to protect a cherished possession.

"Worship that book," she told the children. "Honor that book. It could take you beyond the borders of your village."

A library is so much more than the four walls that contain it. A library can exist wherever books are read and loved.

"Literate children will go back to their communities," Spillberg says. "Literate children will help their families make greater profits on their farms. And increased literacy will one day help Uganda grow out of the Third World."

THIS CHRISTMAS, Spillberg again will return to her village — this time, with 5,000 books. Once again, the villagers will welcome their visitors with song and dance, the children will press together in anticipation, the elders will bless the books and offer thanks. "It is my duty to help my people," she says, "my duty that lead me back home to this culture that I belong to."



Anyone who has books or ideas to share may contact Spillberg by e-mail at africareads@gmail.com