

## Teacher takes on a global mission

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PROVIDENCE — When Racheal Adriko-Spillberg found herself cramming 400 children's books into suitcases to take back to her village in Uganda, she knew she had reached the point of no return.

In a matter of months the African-born Cambridge schoolteacher had parlayed one small act of kindness into a non-profit agency whose mission is to bring literacy and global awareness to African and American children.

It all started in December 2004 at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School where Adriko-Spillberg teaches a literacy workshop. As she walked the halls, thinking about her impending trip home for the holidays, Adriko-Spillberg noticed a cardboard box filled with old books. A sign on the box encouraged passers-by to take whatever they wanted.

It instantly occurred to Adriko-Spillberg that she should take the books home with her to Arua, a small rural village in northern Uganda.

The United Nations had recently agreed to sponsor free primary schooling in Africa — four children per family, to be exact — but many impoverished African nations were not able to purchase essential supplies like books, pencils, and paper. Adriko-Spillberg decided that she would take the books with her when she returned to Arua.

She immediately called her family in Arua and told them about her plan. They relayed the information to the village elders, who held a public forum. Volunteers came out of the woodwork, according to Adriko-Spillberg.

One villager donated a bicycle to deliver the books; another donated a box. A third volunteer, a middle-age man named Dixon Erima, said he would deliver the books himself.

Although Adriko-Spillberg was thrilled with the concept of collecting used books and sending them to African schoolchildren, she was surprised to learn that her students didn't initially feel the same way.

When she broached the subject to her class and asked them if they would like to help her collect more books, they seemed confused. They simply couldn't imagine a school without notebooks, pencils, computers, books, a revelation which gave Adriko-Spillberg's African literacy campaign a secondary objective. If a generation of African children was to embrace literacy, a generation of American children would have to understand and embrace the value of international philanthropy.

One day Adriko-Spillberg removed all books, chalk, pencils and paper from her classroom in an attempt to demonstrate to her class what life was like for the typical African student. Her students got the picture.

Since then, Adriko-Spillberg has established Africa Reads, an independent nonprofit organization committed to African literacy and American enlightenment. She even takes her show on the road, visiting classrooms throughout Southern New England to collect books and open



Racheal Adriko-Spillberg

*Slice of Life*

minds (She visited Lincoln Middle School last November). Her efforts, aided by countless students and companies such as Lighthouse Medical Management, a software company which has already delivered 600 books to Africa on her behalf, have already made splash.

Africa Reads is now in the process of forming a board of directors and establishing partnerships with local businesses and organizations. As of Sunday, the fledgling agency has collected 15,000 books. Currently, said Adriko-Spillberg, it is looking for a way to ship them to Uganda.

There is talk of expanding the program's coverage area to include the neighboring villages of Mvarra, Vurra, Koboko, Ombachi, building a library on a parcel of donated land, developing adult education classes and purchasing another bicycle or two. More and more elaborate book drives and fundraisers are inevitable.

"It's wonderful and very exciting, but we're still climbing that hill," Adriko-Spillberg said. "We're still looking for funds and partners to help us achieve our goals. We're very proud of what we've done, but we won't stop until every child in Africa has a book."

Adriko-Spillberg has always been passionate about literacy and education.

When she was a child in Uganda, and later as a political refugee in Kenya, she dreamed about coming to America, getting an education and making a difference.

After graduating high school, Adriko-Spillberg applied to several American colleges through the U.S. Embassy in Uganda, despite her father's wishes. When he discovered that she had been accepted by Fisher College, an all-girls school in Boston, he was furious, but she was undeterred.

Adriko-Spillberg's father eventually relented and allowed her to come to America in 1995.

Since then she has earned an associates degree in business administration at Fisher and a bachelors degree in health and human services and education at Suffolk University. She has been a teacher in the Cambridge school system for the past eight years.

For more information on Africa Reads or to offer supplies and services, call 401-383-6124 or visit them online at [www.africareads.org](http://www.africareads.org).