



FIRST PERSON

Volunteer Helps Transform Children Into Readers

In Liberia, USAID Learning Resource Centers and an African story collection revive the joy of reading



Photo: USAID/ Nena Terrell

Peace Corps Response Volunteer Gloria Reichmann (left) organizes books and supplies with a local staff member at a USAID Learning Resource Center in Gbarnga, Liberia

“One person can make a big difference in a small amount of time,” said Peace Corps volunteer Gloria Reichmann, who assisted USAID Learning Resource Centers in Liberia.

Telling Our Story
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With a wide grin, twinkling eyes, and no-nonsense nature of a retired school teacher, Peace Corps Response Volunteer Gloria Reichmann welcomes students into the USAID Learning Resource Center in Bong County, Liberia. She points out story books and explains the new “Reading Lion’s Club”- read 10 books and receive a pencil, candy, and your name recorded on the reading room wall.

Excitement erupts when children see a collection of Macmillan-Africa stories about children like themselves. A favorite – *The Big Bad Snake* – tells the story of Yaw, a boy who saved his small village by outsmarting the largest and meanest snake in the forest.

Reichmann reads a story, then asks the children to read it. Studies show that when teachers read aloud student performance increases by 10 correct words per minute. A USAID-sponsored early grade reading assessment found students in grade two are reading only 18 correct words per minute – in the United States, second grade students reading less than 70 words per minute are considered at severe risk. In Liberia, where adult literacy is 52%, many schools rely on volunteer or poorly-trained teachers with limited reading skills.

The ability to read determines a student’s ability to learn and advance in life, but school books are a precious commodity in Liberia. Most teachers write passages from the one textbook they possess or a book they have borrowed onto a blackboard, and the children learn by copying it into their notebooks.

Six Learning Resource Centers were established under a USAID accelerated learning program, which allows those with disrupted schooling due to 14 years of war to complete six years of elementary school in three. Reichmann was assigned to Liberia as a librarian to work with local staff at the USAID learning centers to organize and catalog books, direct carpenters to assemble bookshelves, create comfortable reading spaces, and bundle books for delivery to rural schools.

Piles of books had overwhelmed the capacity of the staff who had never developed programs to promote reading. Reichmann’s passion and professional expertise demonstrate that libraries can be more than book repositories - they can serve communities.