

Eric Tang | Project Leader – Meheba Friendly Library | FORGE
Program | Meheba, Zambia

Student Globe Questionnaire

1. *Practical and Specific Information*

A- Name of project, country, community?

As an ambassador of FORGE, my project was the establishment of the Meheba Friendly Library in the Meheba Refugee Settlement in the Northwest Province of the Republic of Zambia.

B- Duration and cost of your project?

As all good projects must be sustainable, the duration of my project cannot be said to have ended so long as the library remains in operation. With that said, I personally spent 7 weeks working inside the settlement collaborating with refugee leaders (including many high school students) to lay the groundwork for the library. The overall cost was approximately \$8000.

C- How was the money fundraised and from who?

Each FORGE participant was required to fundraise \$4000 to cover travel, living, and project expenses for the program. I raised over \$5000, through personal solicitation, selling a book which I wrote and self-published, and a Rotary Club contribution.

D- How was the project budget spent?

\$5000 was spent to transport a shipment of 25,000 books from the headquarters of our partners, Books for Africa, in Minnesota to Meheba in Zambia. The additional \$3000 went towards cleaning out and renovating the library, paying local carpenters to construct shelves, paints, flooring, furniture, and other miscellaneous items.

2. *Project Vision and Inspiration*

A-What was the vision of your project?

The vision of my project was a community library and community space where refugees and local Zambians alike could gather to search for information, read, discuss, and feel safe.

B- What social need did it confront?

Lack of educational resources is a major problem inside the Meheba settlement. For example, at the time of our arrival, most classrooms in the camps primary schools had only a few books for the dozens of students in each classroom. Thanks to our good friends at Books for Africa, we were able to provide textbooks sufficient to nearly allow one for every student.

C- Why did you as an individual decided to become part of this project?

Although I believe that one should never turn down an opportunity to help out another human being no matter how large or small the task, from a more global view, I have always felt the strongest moral obligation to help those in most need first. As far as marginalized human beings go, it is hard to find more compelling cases for assistance than refugees who've fled war in their homeland only to live for decades in camps.

3. Project Aim and Plan

A- What were the mission and specific goals of your project?

The mission was to identify and work with refugee leaders in designing and implementing the creation of a community library.

B- What were the steps taken to implement your project?

The implementation of the library project really involved three phases. 1) The pre-trip US phase, 2) the pre-books African phase, and 3) the post-books African phase. In the six months before embarking on the unending but exhilarating journey from LA to NYC to Madrid to Johannesburg to Lusaka to Meheba, I worked alongside my two other UCLA FORGE team members to create and flush out our project proposals, fundraise, develop the necessary partnerships, as well as to prepare myself (and my understandably worried parents) for the trip.

Perhaps most vital of all my phase one activities was linking up and forging a three-way partnership with Books for Africa (BFA) and Better World Books (BWB). It was truly the most beautiful of symbiotic relationships. FORGE members would run book drives on their college campuses and donate the books to BWB (a for-profit enterprise). BWB would in turn give FORGE a dollar or so per book collected and then sell the books online. Additionally, BWB donates a significant percentage of its proceeds to fund the operations of its nonprofit partner Books for Africa which, as the name implies, ships books to Africa. BFA put together a shipment of 25,000 books for our library and FORGE paid them for the shipping. With the logistics settled, the major part of phase one was complete.

Phase two began after a day or two of acquainting ourselves with the extremely foreign environs of the Meheba Refugee Settlement and the secondary school where the library would be located. The warehouse that was the designated as the future home of the library had been partially cleaned out, but we still had some work to do on the physical infrastructure including making some windows, building a metal wired fence for the open wall for what would later become the "reading room," and bashing a hole in the wall to make a door so all three rooms (see attached diagram) would be connected.

The other major part of phase two was the hardest but most exciting, enlightening and rewarding part of the whole venture. In conjunction with the FORGE philosophy of not imposing western values and ensuring sustainability, we felt it was critical to make it clear from the beginning that this was *their* library, not ours. The refugees and Zambians would be reaping the fruits not us, but only if they worked hard. We were just there to provide the seeds (and some fertilizer when necessary).

Anyhow, with the goal of community buy-on foremost in our minds, we began by instigating a series of brainstorming sessions where we asked the refugees to envision and describe what their ideal library would look like, what sort of atmosphere it would have, what they wanted from it. From those early talks, two committees were developed. One committee that would focus on the internal and external aesthetics of the library and the second which would focus on logistics and administration.

With the assistance of Tom Silverman and other FORGE ambassadors, I helped facilitate the discussion of the two committees, but in both groups leaders quickly emerged and my role faded to more of a participant.

Keeping in the democratic spirit of the entire endeavor, color schemes and designs for the library were debated and voted on. And under the master artistic direction of 11th grader, Victor Chinyemba, visions slowly took shape and produced what you can now see in the adjacent photos.

On the other side of things, the logistics committee and I tackled what would prove to be perhaps the greatest challenge of phase two: developing a unique but functional categorizing system for the books. Instead of imposing the Dewey Decimal system, I decided it would be a fascinating experiment to see how, when given the opportunity, a group of refugees from all over Africa would slice and dice up books into categories that fit with how their brains functioned and how their school curriculum was organized.

The process of establishing categories, subcategories, and sub-subcategories proved amazingly challenging - yet extremely fun. Pure sciences, applied sciences, math, history, European history, African history, geography, primary level reading, secondary level reading, and on and on and on. Plus, interesting questions always popped up: "If you find a book about the "History of Philosophy," do you put that under History or Philosophy?"

After much debate and several votes, we finally arrived at a system that seemed workable, simple, comprehensive, and logical. So, we had that major challenge solved, but we still had one major problem: No books!

It seemed that everyday for a month a new rumor of the books arrival came only to usher in another night of disappointment.

Finally, far later than any of us hoped (but hey, it's Africa Time, right? What can you do?), the sounds of a rumbling eighteen-wheeler echoed

down Road 6 before that glorious truck emerged from a cloud of dust and pulled up alongside the empty library.

Everybody within earshot emerged and rallied around the truck, jumping for joy and dancing. Too overcome with relief to dance, I merely watched the jubilation and smiled.

Because of the late arrival of the books and the massive undertaking of organizing and labeling 25,000 books, I would have to leave before the completion of phase three and the opening of the library. Still, working tirelessly around the clock and with the enthusiastic support of our refugee friends, in just a week we had removed all the books from the boxes and organized them into the pre-designated categories. The day before our FORGE team departed from Meheba, we had a christening ceremony and celebration. We all put paint on our hands and left an imprint on the side of the library. Some more creative students took it upon themselves to decorate the remaining space. The result was a beautiful, lively, and profoundly "Meheban" creation. I could not have been prouder.

We left the completion of the library in the hands and under the direction of four graduating refugees: Headboy Peter (I forget his last name) from Sudan; Vice-headboy Paul Ohisa, also from Sudan; Victor Chinyemba, an Angolan refugee who took over direction of the outside mural; and Boas Fernando, another Angolan and one of the top students at the school. Over the next several months, these four would be assisted by members of the refugee community, UNHCR, and our NGO partners in the camp to complete the library and, at last, open it up to the public.

And open it remains for all to come, learn, and enjoy.

Personal Essay

"Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become head of the mine, that the child of a

farmworker can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have now what we are given, that separates one person from another."

During my time in Meheba, I read these powerful words in the epic autobiography of Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, and they struck a chord in my soul. So true, so eloquent, and so powerful like so much of his epic tale of struggle, patience, understanding, freedom, triumph, leadership, and forgiveness. So greatly taken with this phrase, I even lobbied to have these words painted or scrawled somewhere on the Meheba Friendly Library, but to no avail (but such is the democratic nature of our library. All ideas considered. Not all ideas accepted.)

These words enthralled me. They inspired me and empowered me to keep moving forward so that someday soon thousands of my refugee and Zambian friends would be able to similarly open up the treasure box of books and discover words to guide them, light a path, ignite a spark in their minds, and, above all, bring them the simple joy of reading which I had at my fingertips all my privileged life.

Plus, without educational resources, ignorance and myths prevail unchallenged. As we saw all too vividly in discussions about sex and AIDs, these myths were pervasive, powerful, and deadly. Ignorance can kill.

Before we arrived in Meheba, books like many other resources were scarce. Though not as immediately essential to survival as food and shelter, books - as perhaps the best repository of knowledge aside from the internet - are certainly vital to the development of human potential. As the Mandela quote so beautifully articulates, it is only through education that one can achieve his or her dreams.

The refugees whom we came to know and love in Meheba were certainly all dreamers and they had an outrageously intense hunger to learn. They wanted to be lawyers and doctors and statesmen and stateswoman. But without the tools to grow their minds, those dreams would likely remain stuck in the realm of fantasy.

Of course, providing books is no panacea for the problems of the refugee education process. There is much more that needs to be done to ensure that all refugees have access to the resources and opportunities which can allow them to succeed. But with that said, it's a start and big boost.

From a personal standpoint, I gained much confidence in my organizing and leadership abilities from this experience. Lessons and clichés from my past hardened into solid truths. "Have a plan." "Be flexible." "Trust but verify." "Listen before talking."

Above all, I learned that when working with the right people, anything is possible - even in a strange, isolated, and unforgiving environment. It is almost unbelievable when you consider the larger story: a group of nine inexperienced college students came together in a fairly short time frame to enact a half dozen empowering projects in a refugee settlement thousands of miles from their homes and completely disconnected from the amenities and advances of modern society. Truly, it is a lesson to all that anything is achievable if you want it and will it.

As a final note, I can only say that I gained the most precious of all of life's gifts during my time in Meheba - friendship. From Puerto Rico, California, Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio we came together to work with refugees from Angola, Congo, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Rwanda, and Burundi as well as local Zambians. So many different backgrounds, races, religions, and stories, and yet, drawn together by a common desire for a better, happier world we established not only a large and beautiful library but something even more long-lasting and powerful - the bonds of peace, respect, and love.