



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty.”

-Father Joseph Wresinski,
1917-1988, founder of
ATD Fourth World
Movement

Recently, while I was at the Remote Area Medical clinic in Virginia, I met a French couple, Patricia and Claude Heyberger. They are volunteers for an organization called the Fourth World Movement, which is an international organization that fights extreme poverty and promotes human rights. For the last eight years, they have been working with street children in Burkina Faso, a country in western Africa where 56% of the population is under 18 (UNICEF).

They have been doing this using street libraries, a concept I had heard of but knew little about. We spent about an hour talking about children and books and libraries and I was struck by their dedication and commitment to this organization and its goals.

I was particularly interested in hearing more about the street libraries – what they are and how they work. The main idea, they explained, is to work alongside the local people, lis-

tening to them and using their ideas to develop programs. They stressed this notion – that it is not appropriate to come in from the outside and decide what people need. Rather, volunteers must reflect on what they are hearing and use that information as a guide.

So, part of a street library is simply showing up with a few books and using the books to get to know the community. Since they worked with street children, every day they would bring out a book or two and talk to the children about the book. They would ask the children questions: What do you see in this picture? What is happening? By doing this, they would learn more about how these kids view the world and what is familiar to them and what is not.

Patricia pointed out that it is important to begin with books that make sense to the children. If a book has pictures of snow, for instance, and they have never seen snow, they

may find it too unfamiliar and be put off. It is through these conversations that trust is built and a relationship can begin.

This approach reminds me of the one we use for any beginning reader. We start with the familiar and then slowly, as confidence is built, we move to the unfamiliar. Think of all those toddler books full of pictures of toys and familiar household items or kittens and puppies. From these, parents can move to larger vehicles or other animals, like tigers and elephants. Once a child knows a book can be relevant, they are willing to accept the new or strange. The street libraries work on the same concept and it makes sense to me.

Tim Walker has written a wonderful article about the street libraries in New York City and it is available on tolerance.org, a part of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Walker describes the United

States history of these libraries – going back more than fifteen years – and gives a touching look at the impact they have had on the daily lives of more than 350 children each week. He talks more about the ideas behind them, stressing what he calls “the firm belief that all children can learn in the proper environment and that everyone – irrespective of their race, culture, gender, religion or socio-economic status – has something to offer.”

This affirming message came clearly from Patricia and Claude, too. Over and over, they emphasized how much we can all learn from each other. Their commitment to this work was inspiring and I am grateful to have met them.