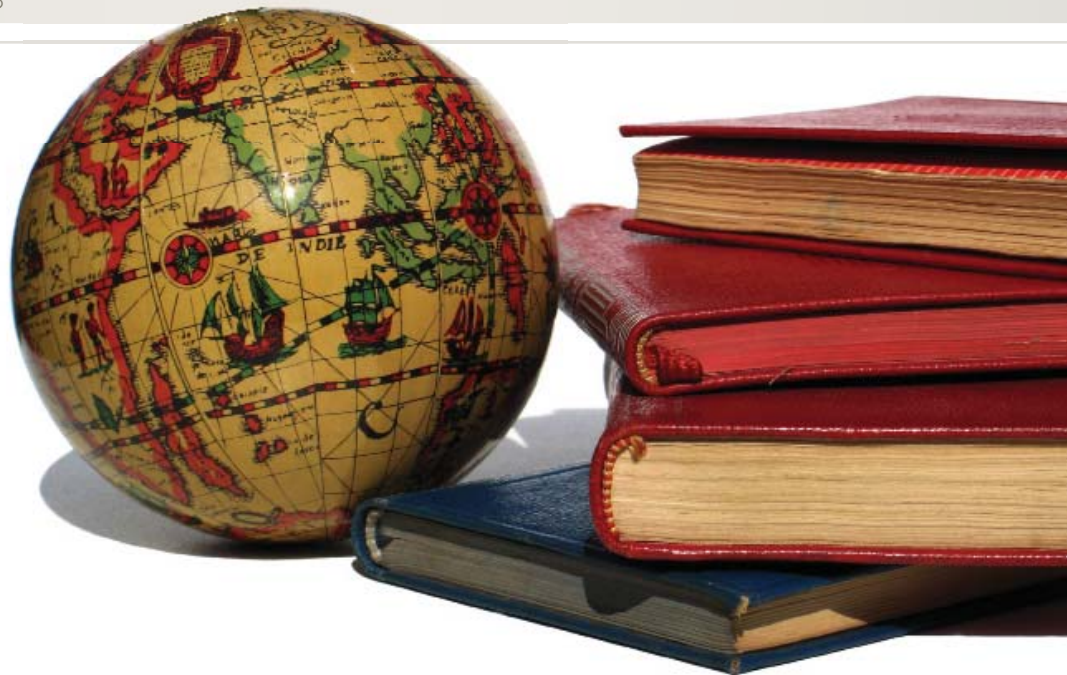


# Lifting literacy levels in South Africa

[Words] Meagan Jones



**FOR** most Westerners, reading is more of a birthright than a privileged skill. Bedtime stories bring back warm memories and recollections of school spelling bees incite either panic or pride. For many people in South Africa however, literacy is a luxury. Most South African children never have the chance to read a book for fun and a huge chunk of the population do not have books in their homes.

Illiteracy rates are high and final school year pass rates remain low. Around 24 per cent of adults over 15 years of age are illiterate and 6 to 8 million adults are functionally illiterate.

One of the basic causes of this is the lack of money to fund education. The country's most poverty-stricken areas made up 40 per cent of all schools in 2007 and resources are not sufficient to provide every learner (student) with the opportunity to become a confident reader and writer. The lack of books, followed by the lack of money, was cited as the leading barrier to education among 7 to 18 year olds in 2006.

To work on these issues, the South African Department of Education has help from a number of literacy-promoting non-governmental organisations (NGOs). One of the most successful of these has been the Rotary-led 'Bury Me in Books' campaign.

It all started seven years ago when then DGEs Ted Pope (D9300) and Charlie Clemmons (D5890) launched the Bury Me in Books campaign. Since then, Rotary clubs in Texas together with schools and private individuals have collected and shipped close to 9 million books through the 'Rotary Books for the World' project.

The literacy initiative is run under the auspices of District 9300 through the Rotary Humanitarian Centre in Bedfordview, South Africa. The centre is managed by PDG Ted Pope and Matching Grant Chairperson Robin Bath. Books are unloaded from the containers and sorted and stacked by Rotary volunteers under the guidance of PDG Charlie Clemmons, PP Barb Clemmons, Rotarian Angie Jiminez and his staff. Since May 2007, 499,073 books have been delivered to schools representing 51.48 per cent of the 918,311 books distributed – an average of 55,396 books per month. To date, over 4.2 million people have benefited from receiving these books.

"This project has the potential to become Rotary International's most prominent literacy project," says Robin Bath. "We've had visits to our centre by Chairman of the Foundation Trustees Bob Scott, RI President Wilf Wilkinson and most recently RI President D.K. Lee. All were very impressed with the organisation and what we have achieved since May 2007. President D.K. Lee even went so far as to comment that this was the best project he had seen."

The Bury me in Books campaign gained a new lease of life in February 2008 when then DG and PRRG Zone 10A Africa Coordinator, Shirley Downie, approached the government-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and successfully negotiated the lighting of the Humanity in Motion advertisements on their radio and TV channels.

Acting Chairperson for the SABC Foundation, Gail Pedra, agreed to partner the campaign with RI and PostNet, who produced the Bury me in Books TV advertisement. The campaign was launched in September when South Africa celebrates Literacy Month.

"It's a perfect partnership," says Robin. "Rotary International is shipping the books to South Africa, PostNet will deliver the books via its fleet of PostNet Courier vehicles and 5FM will give the project a national voice via the airwaves."

PDG Shirley Downie, who has fielded over 7,500 calls since the advertising campaign's launch, says the response has been staggering.

"We've had thousands of book requests – the oldest caller being a 74 year old bedridden lady whose nearest bookstall is 75 kilometres from her old age home. The need is huge! The cry for knowledge is evident. Schools have expressed the need to start a library and others want to replace old library books. Volunteers of community projects want books to teach the under privileged to read and learning centres say they will take anything we offer."

In order to sustain South Africa's huge literacy demands, the literacy project needs more books.

"South Africans will read whatever they can get their hands on," says Shirley. "Due to the success of the campaign, Gail Pedra has requested Rotary run a 'Back to School' Literacy campaign in January



2009 when the schools open. PostNet has agreed to partner Rotary once again. We need books, pencils, erasers, rulers and sharpeners, PCs, medical equipment, toys, wheelchairs, mattresses and whatever donors think we can use. Funds will also always be welcome.

“Thousands of underprivileged South Africans will benefit from your generosity. Your support will help reduce the illiteracy rate, you will give people a variety of books to read and they will gain an education and thus the opportunity to earn a living.”

### How you can help

Funding the Bury me in Books program involves paying for the land transport of the books in the US and South Africa, the seaborne transport from Texas to Durban and operational costs at the

Humanitarian Centre. Costs average \$4,100 for sea transport, \$2,250 for a container and \$2,100 for transport from Durban to the centre. If non-US Dollars are sent, the amount must be US\$200 or more for the financial institutions to process the donation. Send contributions to: **The Second Wind Foundation, c/o PDG Charles Clemmons, 4601 Hamblen Ct, Seabrook, TX, 77586, USA.** Contact Charlie at [c.clemmons@att.net](mailto:c.clemmons@att.net) Make checks payable to: The Second Wind Foundation. Indicate that the donation is for the ROTA fund.

**For more information on the Bury me in Books campaign visit [www.burymeinbooks.co.za](http://www.burymeinbooks.co.za) or contact PDG Shirley Downie on [shirleyd@phomella.co.za](mailto:shirleyd@phomella.co.za); mobile +27 (0) 833 08 0042 – Skype: Shirley.Downie** ■

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