Houle heads up book program in Africa

By Doris Swan
Barb Houle of Austin, for-
merly of Ironwood and daughter of Mary Lou and the late Al Swan, is president of Books for
Africa, a program that provides books to hospitalized patients in Africa, as well as schools in the
continent.

Houle returned to the United States, when the Peace Corps was fulfilled, and, then, when she met Sibisi, who was working as a volunteer science teacher in junior high school. Houle earned an undergraduate degree in Natural Science from the College of St. Benedict. She then joined the Peace Corps and was assigned to Swaziland, Africa, where she worked as a volunteer science teacher in a junior and senior high school. In Swaziland, she met Lindiwe Sibisi, who was also a volunteer. “We became lifelong friends,” said Houle. After her commitment to the Peace Corps was fulfilled, she left Africa.

She spent two years in the Phoenix, Arizona, area, then, when she graduated, she worked for an environmental company, then as a library lab assistant at a community college in the Twin Cities.

While managing the biology lab she began to consider returning to college. She took some psychology courses and was working for an environmental company. Eventually, she earned a Master’s Degree in psychology and, then, a PhD in Social Psychology.

After she completed graduate school, Houle began teaching at Roswell Community College in Austin, where she has been teaching for the past 17 years. While teaching, she formed an employment group at the community college that formalized and launched Read to Recovery. While on sabbatical in 2009–2010 in Swaziland, she and Sibisi went to a hospital to visit a patient. It was then Houle observed something lacking in patient care. “While we were there visiting a patient in the women’s ward. I looked around at the patients. I noticed they had nothing to do while they were recovering,” she said.

She thought, wouldn’t it be helpful if they had something to do while they were recovering… no books, no magazines… no TV to watch, nothing.”

When she presented her observations to Sibisi, there was an immediate agreement. It was from that idea that the Read to Recovery project was born; Houle and Sibisi became co-founders and managers of the program. Its name took long for the women to formulate a plan and launch the program. The project began in 2010 with a publicity campaign and soon books and shipping funds were being donated.

Since that idea, generous people and organizations have donated books… people have shared their personal experiences for shipping, purchased, and shipped countless books to Swaziland, then the boxes of books are put on a cart and the cart is wheeled around to the patients for them to read while they are recovering. The idea was to get a patient’s mind off their health issues, distract them and lower their stress.

In 2017, Houle was in Swaziland on sabbatical. While the book project was not part of her earlier trip, the 2017 sabbatical included a focus to deliver boxes of books that had been previously collected and shipped. She helped the two women deliver the books.

Some months later, during the fall of 2017, Houle visited Swaziland in July 2019 to help sort and deliver the books that were shipped in the container. The books, the Swazi people are so grateful to receive the books… seeing their excitement and gratfulness is very heartwarming. We hope in patient recovery, and providing books for school libraries, we hope it helps them with their education and learning. Since that idea, generous people and organizations have donated millions of books annually to the continent.

BPA partners with pro-grams like Read to Recovery. When they partnered with BPA, in order to assist in ef-forts to raise funds for shipping books, the Give to the Max project provided an avenue that builds strength in shipping funds to make sure there is a steady stream of containers of books.

“Through very generous people and donations, we raised over $100,000 to ship a container of books—22,000 books— to Swaziland, for the Read to Recovery project. It was during this time—2016–2017—Swaziland changed its name to Eswatini. While the country changed, the movement toward providing literacy continued to move forward.

Note: Read to Recovery is situated as one of the projects under BPA and benefits from the larger organization’s mission, which is to end Africa’s book famine.

The container was shipped and arrived late spring, early summer 2019. Houle, her sis-ter, Sue Spitz, and niece, Stefanie Spitz, along with Sibisi’s son, Lungelo, arrived in July 2019 to help sort and deliver the books that were shipped in the container. The donated funds were raised to ship a container of books.

The project began in 2010 with a pub-licity campaign and soon books and shipping funds were being donated.

Since that idea, generous people and organizations have donated books... people have shared their personal experiences for shipping, purchased, and shipped countless books to Swaziland, then the boxes of books are put on a cart and the cart is wheeled around to the patients for them to read while they are recovering. The idea was to get a patient’s mind off their health issues, distract them and lower their stress.

In 2017, Houle was in Swaziland on sabbatical. While the book project was not part of her earlier trip, the 2017 sabbatical included a focus to deliver boxes of books that had been previously collected and shipped. She helped the two women deliver the books.

Some months later, during the fall of 2017, Houle visited Swaziland in July 2019 to help sort and deliver the books that were shipped in the container. The books, the Swazi people are so grateful to receive the books… seeing their excitement and gratfulness is very heartwarming. We hope in patient recovery, and providing books for school libraries, we hope it helps them with their education and learning.

Read To Recovery, a program that provides books to hospitalized pa-tients and school libraries in Africa. Houle and Sibisi are co-founders of the program.