Making connections through books; Austin woman helps bring books to people in Africa

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From the beginning of its story, Read To Recovery's plot continues to thicken as the program continues to thrive.

Having started off with an idea to help provide schools, health centers and hospitals over in the South African country of Eswatini — formerly known as Swaziland before its new name change in 2018 — get access to reading material for patients who were recovering from various treatments and procedures.

For almost a decade, Read To Recovery has been helping communities in Eswatini gain access to reading materials.
Barb Houle, a psychology instructor at Riverland Community College, first got together with a friend and colleague Lindiwe Sibisi after visiting a relative at Mbabane Government Hospital in Eswatini. During the visit, they noticed patients who were in their beds with nothing available to them in order to pass the recovery time.

“There were no books, magazines or televisions,” Houle said. “There was nothing. We thought if they had something to read during their recovery, then it can keep their minds busy and even lower their stress level. I talked to my friend and colleague and she agreed.”

Read To Recovery was born from that single conversation and idea, leading to the development of a program that would assist with sending books and other materials to Eswatini. During their time, Houle and volunteers saw to it that donated books were given to the hospital or health center and were wheeled around to patients on a cart. There, they had options in what book to read or to have their loved one read to them.

Since then, the program changed significantly. Houle said what started with a few hundred books in a couple of boxes eventually grew to sending an entire shipping container filled to the brim with more than 22,000 books to Eswatini this summer.

“There were a lot of different genres they could choose from,” she noted. “There were health books, religious books, leisure books, math and social studies books, medical health books and adult fiction books. There were books sent to schools to help them start their own school libraries.”
Back in October 2017, Read To Recovery partnered with Books To Africa that assisted with fundraising efforts to cover shipping expenses for sending books to the community in Eswatini. Then in November 2018, Houle said that the program became the focus project for Give to the Max, where nonprofits and schools receive donations for various projects.

“We raised enough donations to meet our goal, and even a little more than our goal,” she said. “It was amazing.”

Then, Houle traveled to Eswatini with her sister, Sue Spitz, and niece Stefani, and met up with Sibisi and her son, Lungelo Sibisi, this summer to help distribute the donated books. Their arrival prompted a celebration in the community, with many excited to receive the literature. Houle said that soccer uniforms and school supplies were also among the donated items.

“We helped deliver the books and sorted them,” she said. “Their response was joyous and grateful.”

Looking ahead, Houle wants to attempt another massive donation by filling another shipping container with books in the years ahead as well as seeing additional schools, hospitals and health centers being built. For those recovering in hospitals where time seems to tick slowly, the hope was by providing reading material they can escape from pain and be able to heal.
“The support for the project is amazing,” Houle said. “It was amazing to see the gratefulness from those in the schools, hospitals and health centers. It's nothing but joyous. To know that the books will be helpful to the people is heartwarming and fantastic.”