



READING OWLS INTERNATIONAL

Creating Readers... for Life

READING OWLS
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THE POWER OF COLLABORATIONS

*Reading Owls and the
Peace Corps join
forces to tackle
illiteracy in Jamaica*

*Dan Mueller, US Peace
Corps volunteer at Kendal
Primary, Jamaica, along
with two of her students*



ABOVE: SECTION OF READING OWLS LIBRARY AT KENDAL PRIMARY SCHOOL, JAMAICA
BELOW: UNSTRUCTURED READING TIME



A Special Update on

The Learning Landscape in Jamaica

by Dan Mueller

Peace Corps and Reading Owls join forces to tackle illiteracy in Jamaica

I have wanted to be a United States Peace Corps Volunteer since I was ten years old. My fifth grade teacher assigned me President John F Kennedy, who instituted the Corps under an executive order in 1961, for a presidential biography assignment. I think at the time, I just liked the idea of it and the way it sounded, but it was a sweet song that would echo across my mind for many years to come. Of course, it took 13 more years, a Jesuit education, and a bundle of life experiences to get me here to Jamaica, where I consider to be the right place at the right time.

As a peace worker, when I think about community development, my brain starts asking a million questions: what are our strengths and weaknesses? What has worked in the past? What hasn't? How can we be intentional and proactive? How can we be our best possible community?

But when I scale that down to a truly grassroots level, I am reminded that linking individuals with the tools necessary to revitalize their lives is a more interpersonal practice. This is why working within the education sector was initially so appealing to me and when I realized that would mean serving as a literacy advisor, working with elementary school students struggling to read, I knew I had made the right decision. We say, "learn to read then read to learn," and I cannot think of more powerful resources to equip the young minds and future leaders of the world with than a strong understanding of the power of the written word and a passion for reading. Having taught citizenship literacy to immigrants and refugees at the International Institute of St. Louis, this work seemed like a good fit; what I couldn't have predicted was that the loop I would be thrown for working intimately with these lively children would actually be the most humbling learning experience of a lifetime.

Peace Corps' first goal is "to help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women," so unfortunately, I would not be here in Jamaica, the beautiful land of wood & water, if some basic needs were being met. In my community and other rural areas alike, we are combatting high levels of adult and youth unemployment, poor parenting, limited access to resources and training and infrastructural issues like poor roads and abandoned or vandalized buildings. Many of these problems are worsened by, if not attributed to, gaps in Jamaica's literacy rate, and the problems become apparent at early stages in the cycle of poverty. Children from communities "in the bush" are already faced with resource scarcity—packing into crowded schools with small, shrinking budgets and expensive costs for daily operations—when they enter a system oriented toward "getting through."



Without proper safeguarding and screening, many students reach grade levels far beyond their skill levels in reading, writing, and comprehension.

However, perhaps the most beautiful and complicated of reasons for a low literacy rate is the rich oral tradition of the Patois language spoken in many dialects islandwide.

Because it is just that, an oral tradition, a lack of reading and writing in the intricate mother tongue, though adding to the depth and complexity of the place and its people, translates into an unbalanced foundation for learning, reading and writing English, the official language of Jamaica. While the push for a formalized system and world recognition of Patois as a language will, hopefully, soon and surely help level this culturally-enriching imbalance, as a professional volunteer, it's important for me to focus on the things I can help change and to seize the opportunities that move my community in that direction.

Upon arriving to a most modest Kendal Primary School and seeing what would be the future site of my pullout sessions, it became clear that the former library-turned-storage-space was a seriously underutilized area for the school and for good reason; the place was overrun with unused textbooks, parasitic creatures had taken up residence, and the clutter was enough to make the most shut-in of hoarders wiggle in discomfort—I

immediately saw an opportunity that could be made possible through the collaboration of my cohorts, though a truly holistic vision would not come into focus until we were linked with an organization with the know-how and resources to help us dream bigger. My program manager had put me in contact with Reading Owls International at the start of the 2016 school year and within a couple weeks of correspondence (proposal exchanges with extensive feedback and suggestions

from all sides), both teams were feeling inspired by the idea of transforming our room from a storage space to an inviting space for the children to read, learn, and grow together. With the help of motivated parents and interested students alike, the Kendal Primary Library was reborn before our very eyes, ready to receive the shipment of new books on its way from the US, which would mean more to this community, school, and its students than could have been initially imagined.

Within the first two days of the grand opening of the school library, more than 50 of the approximately 250 students had checked out books across all five genres currently housed in the space. This number was similar to that of children who circulated in and out of the library on a daily basis for student-led and silent reading times, which had skyrocketed when the room became clear, free, and full of the sights and scents of fresh new literature.

The collaboration, leadership and patience exhibited by our 10 student library monitors alone reinforce the sustainability of what we have worked together to achieve thus far and to say excitement fills the air with potential possibilities of further development, would be an understatement. We may have simply opened the doors to a school library, but we have most wholeheartedly unlocked the door to a world of learning and infinite possibilities to be left open wide for future generations to come.



Peace Corps volunteer
Dan Mueller in the newly
opened library with one of
our students during her
literacy instruction class.