

INSPIRE ATLANTA

Extraordinary people and uplifting stories that bring out the best in all of us



Niclette Mundabi poses with some of the French books she is helping send to the Democratic Republic of Congo in March in front of stacks of shipments at the Books for Africa warehouse in Marietta. PHOTOS BY PHIL SKINNER FOR THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

Atlanta woman celebrates birthday with gift of literacy

Niclette Mundabi plans to send 45,000 books to kids in her native Congo.

By Laura Berrios
For the AJC

Niclette Mundabi of Atlanta wanted to do something special for her 35th birthday. Instead of receiving presents, she decided to give books—thousands of books—to children in her native country, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Working through the nonprofit Books for Africa, which has an international warehouse in Marietta, Mundabi coordinated a shipment of about 45,000 French-language books, valued at \$268,000, that will set sail out of Canada this spring. French is the official language of the DRC.

Mundabi and Books for Africa colleagues worked with a French-language publisher near Montreal to procure the materials and raise \$20,000 to cover shipping costs.

She plans to travel to the DRC when the books arrive to help partner organizations distribute them to schools and libraries.

"I'd love to see the kids' faces" when the books arrive, said Mundabi, a lifelong avid reader. "If we can teach children while they're young how much books can contribute to their lives, then we can get them reading at a young age and keep that relationship with books. Then, I would have done something good for the world."

To ensure a successful transfer of materials, Mundabi worked closely with the Bythiah Project, a nonprofit based in the capital city of Kinshasa that works with local youths and a government education agency. She recently returned from a trip there.

Books For Africa is the largest shipper of donated text and library books to the African continent, shipping over 59 million books to all 55 countries in Africa since 1988.

Last year, the organization shipped approximately 4,029,000 books, valued at over \$32.6 million, to 32 African countries. They also send thousands of digital books on computers and tablets.

Educational needs in the DRC are great, Mundabi said. Children have little access to French-language books. She said more than half of school-age girls dropped out of school during the pandemic and never returned.

"I'm hoping my container will fill in some of those (educational) gaps that are left behind," she said.

Mundabi also took on the project as a gift to her grandmother, a child bride who dropped out of school to get married at age 12.

"She never got to finish her education, which was her biggest regret," Mundabi said. She said her grandmother valued education and loved reading.

"I wanted to honor her, and I wanted to provide the same opportunity that books had

HOW TO HELP

Volunteers are needed to help sort and pack books at the Books for Africa warehouse at 1491 Cobb Industrial Drive, Building B, Marietta. Learn more at: booksforafrica.org.



Mundabi listens to Books for Africa production manager James Hall at the Marietta warehouse.

provided me growing up," she said.

Mundabi and her family left the DRC when she was 6 and settled in Johannesburg, South Africa. Books were a companion throughout her childhood and beyond.

"I remember reading books at school and being able to sign up for a library card. I read The Baby-sitters Club [series]. Books activated my imagination and introduced me to the world," she said.

"I wanted to be able to provide the same thing for the children in Congo, to know that books can be a companion. Books can add to your creativity and help with your imagination. They're a gateway into different worlds."

Mundabi's family immigrated to the United States when she was a teenager. They settled in metro Atlanta, and Mundabi finished her last two years of high school at Dunwoody High.

She attended colleges in the United Kingdom for undergraduate and graduate degrees. Mundabi is a board member of Books for Africa and director of development for the nonprofit Eastern Congo Initiative, supporting local initiatives in the DRC.

The spring book shipment won't be her last, she said. She is already speaking with different partners on how to send another container soon.

"I'm very intentional about helping," Mundabi said. "I feel like it's all hands on deck when you come from a country like that. You go back, and you see the need. I had to move away from criticizing what I saw on the ground to meeting the needs and solving the problems."

"I'm really privileged to help where I can," she added.

THE UPLIFT



Lilly Baker. COURTESY OF LILLY BAKER

Teen risks life to rescue disabled stranger

High school senior pulls woman out of path of oncoming train.

By Sydney Page
Washington Post

Lilly Baker was driving to meet some friends in Limestone County, Alabama, last month when she spotted a woman with a wheelchair who was struggling to cross the railroad tracks on foot.

"She was just walking along the train tracks with her wheelchair in front of her. She was using it as a stabilizer," said Baker, 18, adding that the woman was laboring as she tried to walk. Since her wheelchair couldn't clear the tracks, she was attempting to use it help her walk across—but she was stuck.

Baker pulled up beside the tracks to see if she could help. Then she saw a train approaching.

"I got out of my car and I went over to her, and by the time I got to her, the lights started flashing on the train and the horn was going off," recalled Baker, who lives in Athens, Alabama. "I grabbed her from behind her arms and I tried to pick her up and walk with her, and we fell."

Baker tried a second time to carry the woman off the tracks—and they fell again.

"The train was so close to us, we had no time to go anywhere," Baker said. "It was a nerve-racking situation."

One more time, as the train drew terrifyingly near, "I grabbed as hard as I could to get her out of there," she continued, explaining that she pulled the woman by her jacket.

Baker said she wasn't worried about putting herself at risk. "I could not leave her there."

Baker narrowly saved the woman's life—and her own. An employee of the railroad company, CSX, later told Baker the train was less than 20 inches away from hitting them both.

The train did, in fact, clip the woman's feet, leading to two broken ankles. It also wrecked the woman's wheelchair.

"My adrenaline was rushing," said Baker, noting that she sat with the woman—who seemed disoriented and was in pain—at the side of the train tracks.

"I was just sitting there crying," Baker said, adding that the train operator halted the train and came to check on them right away. "It was a bad injury," said Jereme Robison, chief of police for the Ardmore Police Department, who responded to the scene. Fortunately, though, "she's going to be fine."

Robison has been in touch with the 53-year-old woman through a social worker. The Washington Post is withholding her name to protect her privacy.

Robison was stunned that a teenager had the foresight and courage to save a stranger.

"I think it's one of the bravest acts I've ever seen," said Robison, who has been a police officer for 20 years. "For an 18-year-old girl who is not big in stature to risk her life to save somebody else, she just showed that bravery comes in all shapes and sizes."

"She's really a hero," he added. Baker, a high school senior, said she didn't think twice.

"If I see anybody in any kind of trouble, I try to help them," she said.

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We recognize a big part of our journalistic mission is to shine a spotlight on wrongdoings and to hold our public officials accountable.

But we also understand the importance of presenting uplifting stories that celebrate our region's moments, milestones and people. We hope you enjoy our weekly feature Inspire Atlanta, which appears in Sunday's Living & Arts

section, and our daily feature The Uplift—a regular dose of touching stories from around the world. We've also expanded that concept with our ePaper-only Inspire Atlanta Extra on Fridays.

Know someone who inspires you or makes metro Atlanta a better place for others? Email us at AJC-InspireAtlanta@ajc.com.