



Retiring Governor General Quentin Bryce and Anne-Sophie Hermann with some of the children who now have access to books through the Buk bilong Pikinini project.

Photo: Ness Kerton, Madness Photography.

DREAM INTO REALITY

Below: Eight year old Josephine demonstrates her reading skills to Anne-Sophie and an audience of 100 people. Without Buk bilong Pikinini she would probably never have had the chance to learn to read.

Bottom: With the children and families: Senior advisors Paul Singer (far left) and Mark Fraser (far right) with the former Governor-General, Anne-Sophie and Joanne Grenenger, Executive Officer of Buk bilong Pikinini. Mark is also the founder of Make A Mark Australia which donated \$10,000 to support Buk bilong Pikinini.

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Anne-Sophie Hermann arrived in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in December 2006 with her 15-month old daughter and her husband, who had been appointed as Australia's High Commissioner to PNG.

Always an avid reader herself, Anne-Sophie could not imagine a life without books. She was ready to take her daughter on this adventure, but quickly realised there were no public libraries to be found in Port Moresby. INCITE asked Anne-Sophie how she went about changing that.

Q: WHEN DID THE IDEA OF LIBRARIES FOR CHILDREN IN PNG FIRST COME TO YOU?

Some of my fondest memories are of my discoveries at the local library in my home town in Denmark, and the struggle to load all the books I wanted to bring home on the back of my bike. I had brought plenty of Danish books to PNG with me, but in order to read stories to my daughters' ever-increasing number of local friends, I needed a library.

I had just read *Reading Magic* by Mem Fox and was very conscious of the importance of reading to children from an early age, along with the joys of getting to know other cultures (as well as your own) through books. The shock and sense of injustice not being able to find a public library locally prompted me to act to do something about it.

I started looking into the possibilities of getting donations of books in Australia and shipping them to PNG and started to talk to people around me about this. When I met Anna Mukerjee (the wife of the UNICEF Representative to PNG) and Queensland Librarian Caroline Podd, things started to move along very quickly. I also had great access (through my husband's position) to all the company heads, politicians and a great variety of people. Anna and I formed a committee of volunteers around us, most often professional expatriate women with great skills and a bit of time on their hands, with a great passion about the project.

Q: HOW DID YOU TURN THE IDEA INTO A REALITY?

The model of a children's library emerged by learning from past practice. Too many books had been donated in the past without any proper framework around their use, often resulting in books just wasting away. We felt that teacher-librarians were needed to read to the children and oversee the care of the books and the library.

We decided to take the libraries to where the children were. Our first library was established in 2008 at the Children's HIV/AIDS and malnutrition ward of Port Moresby General Hospital, the second in a school for disabled children and the third near a settlement and a health clinic.

It was clear from the start that we wanted to serve the most vulnerable children living without any educational opportunities. PNG literacy levels are among the lowest in the Pacific – only 11% of adults are literate in Port Moresby – so we decided to introduce sessions to teach the children who were missing out of school to read.

Buk bilong Pikinini has now established 13 libraries across Papua New Guinea, three more are under construction and many more are on the waiting list. The organisation has a Head Office in Port Moresby, and one in Canberra located at the PNG High Commission. We have a fantastic and committed professional staff of 77 people and still have the help of volunteers in both PNG and Australia for book sorting and fundraising events.

We provide a free literacy, numeracy and awareness program in all the libraries every day and continue to improve our teacher training and syllabus to the highest international standards. We serve more than 100,000 children every year and hope to make them happy bookworms for the years to come.

Q: DID YOU IMAGINE IT WOULD BE SO SUCCESSFUL AND ENJOY SO MUCH COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT?

No, I never imagined that we would be this successful. We are very fortunate to have been embraced by all. The communities we serve are realising that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for their children to learn to read and write, so we are faced with great queues of families outside our libraries.

The amazing people who have all helped along the way are too many to mention here but we have been extremely fortunate and I am forever humbled by their generosity. The local business community paid for the construction of the libraries and the teacher-librarians we employ. We have also received an outstanding level of financial support from the Australian Government through the aid program to help us with capacity building, as well as from organisations and individuals.

To have the Australian Governor General, Quentin Bryce, visit one of our libraries was an absolute highlight and a privilege. She was so wonderful with the children. We are grateful to be working with the Australian Government and

are hoping to one day become accredited as a provider of early childhood learning and care in PNG.

The need is so great in PNG – more than 50% of school children miss out on school and do not own a book or a pencil – so we are sincerely grateful for every dollar and book we receive.

Q: WHAT ARE YOUR AMBITIONS FOR THE CHARITY?

We have requests for books and the establishment of libraries from far-flung corners of PNG every single day. It is hard to not be able to serve everyone but we are currently aiming to get to 25 libraries.

I have long been wishing to be able to provide more local stories and books on our library shelves with PNG children in leadership roles. So we will shortly be running an authors' seminar for budding PNG authors and illustrators, as there are currently no children's books written by Papua New Guinean authors. We are greatly looking forward to this seminar at which Alison Lester, Drusilla Modjeska, Andrew Kelly and Hilary McPhee will work with the local authors to inspire them to want to write for children.

Q: HOW CAN ALIA MEMBERS HELP?

We would greatly welcome any ALIA members conducting book drives and collecting 'gently-used' or new books in the 0 – 6 age group. We particularly need early readers in the 1 – 15 category, big books that the teacher librarians can read from (and which we hardly ever have donated) as well as board books, which have a great longevity on our shelves. We are happy to provide members with book drive posters and brochures. We are always featuring our book drives and donations on our website.

Financial donations can be made securely via Paypal on our website. Sometimes our supporters conduct a book drive and also ask for a gold coin donation or organise a morning tea to make it a special event. We love hearing the stories of how the books and funds are collected!

Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once said, "Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope". I have seen this transformation happen and it is what makes our work so worthwhile.



ANNE-SOPHIE HERMANN

Founder, Chairman and Canberra Office Director
Buk bilong Pikinini

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Find Buk bilong Pikini on Facebook and at www.bukbilongpikinini.org
- Contact Buk bilong Pikinini c/ High Commission of Papua New Guinea +61 2 61201801
- Documentary: The Buk bilong Pikinini Way by Tania Nugent, available for purchase through the Canberra office