



A PROJECT OF THE
UNIVERSITY WOMEN'S
ASSOCIATION

**University of Nigeria,
Nsukka, Nigeria.**

*By reading we learn,
By knowledge we serve*

NEWSLETTER

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In This Issue

This issue of the Newsletter reports many notable developments of the Children's Centre. This period saw particularly lively vacation programs, in particular the introduction of Easter vacation programs. Noteworthy developments were the commissioning of the Chukwudi Tobenna Douglas Azikiwe children's football field and the addition of office and computer furniture. Programs with primary schools in the vicinity also flourished, with increased school library development, library visits and story hour programs, and workshops for teachers. Especially notable was the take-off of a women's reading club to provide opportunities for recreational reading and discussion. We invite you to share these experiences as you go through this issue of the Newsletter.

Easter Vacation Programme, 2006

A most exciting recent development has been the introduction of the Easter Vacation Programme, initiated by Goodhead Uchendu in 2006. Goodhead, a university student seeking to reciprocate for the many benefits he received from the Children's Centre as a child, approached committee members with his suggestions for activities during the Easter holidays. He offered his services and mobilized a team of volunteers to lead varied activities—from computer training and creative arts to sports and excursions to places of interest. Additional help was provided by Children's Centre Committee members, youth corpsers, and staff of the Department of Library and Information Science.

One hundred and twenty-six children registered for the two-week programme, held from April 18-May 1, 2006. Weekdays were devoted to sessions introducing children to the use of computers, creative writing, bead work, sports such as soccer, table tennis and chess, as well as preparation for the end-of-programme show for parents. The most popular excursion was to the University of Nigeria Zoo. This was made more exciting by the addition of an elephant and other animals recently acquired from the Enugu Zoo. Another highlight of the programme was a picnic held on a hill overlooking campus.

The closing ceremony, chaired by UWA patron Ify Nebo, the wife of the Vice-Chancellor, featured a drama on the sacrificial love of parents, modern dance, songs, and debates on topical issues: the proposed third term for the nation's president and the relative worth of public and private schools. Children also exhibited their beadwork, which was purchased by guests for support of the Centre.

Long Vacation Programme, 2006

A vibrant long vacation programme, led by committee chairman Alice Okore and organizer Goodhead Uchendu, was held from August 21 to September 16, 2006 with over 150 children participating. Activities included quiz and debate, video shows, computer training, chorography, story hour, talk on HIV/AIDS, football matches, tie-and-dye, knitting, card making, drawing, baking, and stitch-and-stuff.

The last four activities were taught by Mrs. Ify Nebo, who invited all the children to the Vice-Chancellor's lodge for a demonstration of making banana muffins and taught them her stitch-and-stuff technique of creating new art from paintings. Another highlight of the programme was the excursion to Enugu to visit NTA and Cosmo FM broadcasting stations and learn firsthand about the mass media.

Azikiwe Children's Football Field Commissioned

Another very special event was the commissioning of the Chukwudi Tobenna Douglas Azikiwe children's football field during the closing ceremony of the 2006 long vacation programme. This field was donated by Professor Uche Azikiwe in loving memory of her grandson. Boys sporting green jerseys for the Azikiwe team, named in honour of Nigeria's founding father Nnamdi Azikiwe, and blue jerseys for the Nebo team, named in honour of Vice-Chancellor Chinedu O. Nebo, played an exhibition match to the cheers of the crowd.

Ada Udechukwu Donates Office Furniture

Our former secretary Ada Udechukwu, who is now resident in the United States, donated office furniture worth N30,000 during a visit to Nsukka in January 2006. The furniture includes three computer tables and a printer stand for the computer laboratory and a horizontal filing cabinet to house the Centre's archival records in the librarian's office.

Easter Vacation Programme, 2007

A second Easter vacation programme, again spearheaded by Goodhead Uchendu, took place from April 9-14, 2007 with 116 children participating. Youth corper Ayo Ekun assisted with the organization and recruited additional volunteers from his fellow Youth Corps members. The week's activities included a number of creative arts in addition to computer training, sports, video shows and a talk on leadership. Children were taught music appreciation, singing, and miming. In addition to bead making, new crafts were introduced, including poster making, tie-and-dye and batik textile techniques, and crocheting of towels taught by our patron, Mrs. Ify Nebo. These were sold at great profit during the closing ceremony.

The closing ceremony and exhibition was held on Saturday, April 14th, which was also election day. Attendance was good, despite hitches and long delays in the election. The ceremony included performances by the junior and senior choirs, miming group, and drama by girls on the Cinderella theme and boys on HIV-AIDS. As a grand finale, Vice-Chancellor Chinedu O. Nebo arrived to cheer the Nebo and Azikiwe teams in an exhibition football match.

May 19, 2007 was the day for the picnic, which became a Reading Picnic filmed by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) due to the good offices of Tony Alum, a UNN graduate of Library and Information Science. The grounds were full of children reading, playing circle games and table tennis, enjoying storytelling, and discussing books they had read.



Alice Okore teaching 2nd graders care of books



UWA Patron Ify Nebo presenting prizes



VC and crowd watching football game



Uche Azikiwe opening children's football field

PHOTO ESSAY 2006-2007



Junior choir performing in vacation program



Ngozi Osadebe leading children's games at reading picnic



Chuka Iwundu teaching poster art

Long Vacation Programme, 2007

The Centre mounted a successful vacation programme for fifty participants from August 13 to September 14, 2007. The programme was coordinated by Fidelia Asiegbu, assisted by Ngozi Osadebe. Activities included cookery classes on preparing fish roll and meat pie, computer training, a health talk on HIV/AIDS, sports and games, and excursions. These included local visits to the Motherless Babies Home and the University ventures of Lion Bread and Lion Water and a trip to the Coca Cola Bottling Company at 9th Mile Corner.

Schools Outreach in Cooperation with PULA

Work begun in cooperation with People United for Libraries in Africa (PULA), an American NGO, continued with further extension of library services to public primary schools in the Nsukka area. The original six schools in the project received a second collection of books and three schools with newly developed library accommodation were added. The Headmistress of Township II, Nsukka added the support of family and friends to her own contributions to build a library room. This has been completed and furnished with a cabinet and few desks. Library furniture will be built as soon as the government removes its embargo on schools charging levies to parents. The Community Primary School, Nguru has allocated and secured a spacious room for the library and provided a book cabinet and two large tables with benches as temporary furniture. Umuakashi Primary School has also allocated a room for the library and built shelves attached to the walls to house the collection.

On July 11, 2006 the Children's Centre held a workshop on project work as a way of developing information literacy. The workshop was led by Virginia Dike and Margaret Ajogwu and attended by head teachers and teacher librarians from 22 schools. Resource persons evaluated projects done by the schools during the previous library week and awarded prizes to the schools with the best projects. Criteria included evidence of original input and quality of the information (for instance, inclusion of both textual and visual information); layout, organization and neatness of the work; the variety of sources used and methods of data collection; and the extent to which the projects developed information literacy skills. It was found that projects of the lower grades sometimes were more original than those of the upper grades; the ability to read and write led to slavish copying of textbook materials in the upper grades. This supports the sad contention that the school experience may diminish rather than enhance information-handling skills. It was however heartening that the best projects came from the schools with longer involvement in the information literacy project.

Library Program with University Staff School

The 2006 saw the introduction of a new program of library visits by second grade pupils of the staff school. Classes came on Tuesday mornings for a story hour that combined stories and songs on a selected theme with library orientation, introduction of the resources available in libraries, and instruction in the care of books. In addition to the library visits, story hour was held in first grade classrooms to encourage the love of books and reading.

Bookmark Program for International School Library Day, 2006

The Children's Centre and five cooperating schools participated in sharing child-made bookmarks with schoolchildren in Michigan, South Carolina and Alabama. The exchange was organized by the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) to celebrate International School Library Day on October 23rd. The bookmarks were illustrated on one side and had a brief review of a favorite book on the other. In addition to the bookmarks, the children exchanged information about their schools and way of life. This took the form of letters, photographs, books and posters.

SPECIAL REPORT

Women's Reading Club

Assistance from PULA (People United for Libraries in Africa) led to formation of a women's reading club in 2006. Seven titles were jointly selected and sent from the United States in sets of eight copies. Four were Nigerian novels, two were American and English novels, and one was a work of nonfiction. All provided exciting and thought-provoking reading and stimulated lively discussion. The women first took up four titles by Nigerian authors: *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala, *Graceland* by Chris Abani, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie, and *The Slave Girl* by Buchi Emecheta.

***Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala**, drew a particularly strong reaction from members. This painful account of coming of age under the most life-threatening circumstances is set in an unnamed West African country, which sounds like Liberia or Sierra Leone but could well have been Nigeria. The 'beasts' are child soldiers, forced into a bloody and brutal conflict with no discernable cause. The story is told through the eyes of Agu, a young village boy approaching adolescence, who sees his life change forever as war comes to his village and separates him from the world he has known and everyone he loves. He is drafted into a band of rebel soldiers, who brutalize him and drive him to maim and kill. Agu admires the Commandant of the band as a strong and fearless soldier. Yet the Commandant is a brutal man who directs him to commit atrocities and sexually abuses the boy.

Agu tries to reconcile his murderous frenzies with his image of himself as a good boy by recounting his life before the war, memories of his family and village which sustain him and prevent a total loss of self. He also finds some comfort in his friendship with the boy who discovered him in the bush and fleeting moments of companionship with the other soldiers. As the war goes on and conditions worsen, Agu joins the surviving soldiers in abandoning the fight and finds his way to freedom and the hope of recovery in a rehabilitation camp.

Members felt this novel should be read by all Nigerian young people, who may not fully appreciate the horrors and dehumanization of war, having not experienced the Nigerian Civil War of the late 1960s. Members also noted that the terrible phenomenon of child soldiers is a new development which hardly featured in that earlier conflict. They saw the novel as a cautionary tale of what could happen to Nigeria if people lack the wisdom to avoid violent conflict. The novel also raised troubling questions about the limits of individual freedom in the face of overpowering evil.

***Graceland* by Chris Abani** also portrays a young man trying to find his way in difficult circumstances, without traditional role models or support. The novel weaves its way back and forth between urban Lagos and rural Afikpo, from 1983 back to 1972. Elvis Oke is a school dropout living in the Lagos slum of Maroko with his drunk and unemployed father. Elvis is preoccupied with getting a job, a search which involves him in a spiral of increasingly illegal and dangerous jobs that almost cost him his life. He tries to dissociate himself from his surroundings, through reading, dancing and music.

Through a series of flashbacks, we learn about his more favored childhood in the small Igbo town of Afikpo in Eastern Nigeria, where Elvis lived in relative plenty with his father, a respected school official and community leader, his gentle and educated mother, and his eccentric but devoted grandmother. There is a dark side to family life however, including sexual abuse, violence and murder. When his mother gets sick and dies and his father is

ruined by drink and an unsuccessful political campaign, the two are forced to relocate to Lagos.

In both Afikpo and Lagos Elvis has little to guide him through to manhood. Surprisingly, he survives bitter experiences with his kindness and compassion intact. While he does not receive the expected encouragement and guidance from his father and other male elders, he draws on eclectic experiences and varied relationships and cultural influences to find his way through the maze of adolescence. At the end Elvis is persuaded to accept his friend's offer of a visa to America, where he may be able to join his aunt and pursue his dream of a dancing career.

Discussion of *Graceland* centered on the realistic portrayal of the lives of many Nigerians who are down-and-out and on the qualities that allowed Elvis to survive such unpromising circumstances. Members were also moved by the grim depiction of child abuse, political oppression, and the consequences of poverty in Nigerian society.

***Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Adichie**, recounts the story of Kambili, a fifteen-year-old girl growing up in a wealthy but troubled family in the Eastern Nigerian city of Enugu. The girl adores her father, a wealthy, politically committed and fanatically religious businessman. However, their home is an unhappy one because of the impossible expectations he sets for her and her seventeen-year-old brother, Jaja, his violence toward her longsuffering mother, and his rejection of his traditionalist father.

Kambili and her brother find relief when they are able to visit their Aunty Ifeoma, a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, on an extended holiday and encounter a very different lifestyle: open, exuberant, unpretentious, and direct. She develops positive relationships with her strong and independent aunt, her outspoken and liberated cousin Amaka, and her wise and loving grandfather. Above all, Kambili blossoms as she nurtures her secret love for a young charismatic priest. The power of love she has known at Nsukka enables her to weather the storms that break over the family upon their return to Enugu.

Discussion of this novel centered more on the dysfunctional family and the plight of Kambili's abused mother. While extreme, members recognized characteristics of families they knew, particularly where certain cultural traditions join with a repressive and male-dominated religious orientation in guiding family life.

***The Slave Girl* by Buchi Emecheta**, where a high-spirited and independent adolescent degenerates into a cowed and colorless wife, continued this discussion. *The Slave Girl* provides a sensitive account of growing up from a female perspective, taking a young girl, Ojebeta, from her sale into slavery at the age of seven through adolescence to adulthood. Set in the early twentieth century, it is the story of an orphaned Igbo girl whose selfish older brother secretly sells her to a distant female relative in the market town of Onitsha. From the quiet village life of a treasured daughter, Ojebeta becomes a slave in the large household of a wealthy market woman, witnessing the textile trade, coming of Christianity, and the interactions of slaves and masters. Presenting events through the eyes of Ojebeta as she grows through adolescence, *The Slave Girl* tells a moving story of misfortune and adaptation to circumstances. However, in later years when Ojebeta marries a good and relatively educated man, she is seen to be a shadow of her former self, so that her former suitor can barely recognize her. Members of the reading club felt that unfortunately this could sometimes be the effect of marriage as practiced in the society.

For more information, go to our website at www.childrenscentreunn.org.
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