



Courtesy Milena Lurie

14-year-old Milena Lurie from Pennsylvania helped set up a library in a Tamil Nadu orphanage.

Let's Read Together

By VAIDEHI IYER

She is an American teenager who lives in Haverford, Pennsylvania. Continents away, in the small village of Gandharvakottai in Tamil Nadu, a library named after her was opened in June this year. The Milena Lurie Library at the Lady Lynn Joyful Home for orphans and destitute children is a tribute to this enterprising teenager's efforts to unite different worlds.

Lurie mobilized, in a span of six months, no less than 50,000 books, valued at about \$2.5 million. She is a volunteer with the Global Literacy Project, Inc., a New Jersey-based nonprofit group dedicated to achieving universal literacy.

About 5,000 of the books have been given to the Lady Lynn Joyful Home, and the remainder are reserved for 10 other village schools in Pudukottai district, where Gandharvakottai is located. There are plans to start a bookmobile to reach the larger community and also train teachers in the surrounding areas so that they can teach the children English.

The books donated to the Milena Lurie Library were in Tamil and English, and included Tamil-English dictionaries. "Children can borrow books, of course, but I also read to them...and then ask them to read the same

stories out themselves, by turns. In this way, even those who are poor with the English language, are improving," says Selvi, the librarian at the orphanage. "Moral stories, stories from different lands and cultures, and books with a lot of pictures, are particularly popular."

Lurie, a 10th grader who wants to work in fashion when she grows up, says, "I am honored to have a library named after me and I am so glad to be helping these wonderful kids and putting a smile on their faces."

Lurie found out about the Global Literacy Project through her mother. "Lady Lynn is one of my mother's closest friends and she told my mom that since I was looking for a community service project, I should open a library in the orphanage...so that's where it all began," she says.

Lady Lynn Forester de Rothschild, an American businesswoman and philanthropist, has worked with her husband through The ERANDA Foundation to financially support the Lady Lynn Joyful Home for children and help nearby villages, plant trees and educate students.

The Global Literacy Project decided to name the library after Lurie in recognition of her effort. "At the tender age of 14, Milena has created an oasis of hope in a region characterized by drought—of education and opportunity," says Kavitha Ramsamy, founding trustee and vice president for outreach at the Global Literacy Project. She is also in charge of its India initiatives.

"I can say with certainty that we have seen [a]...positive change since the library opened....The children are not only enjoying, they are also improving their reading and writ-

ing skills," says S. Pitchairaj, director of Integrated Rural Development Center, the organization which administers the orphanage and the library.

"I have read 10 to 15 books since our library opened," says J. Krishna Kumar, 13, who lives at the orphanage. "I read a story about a boy who gets good marks and is very arrogant. Then his classmate scores more and he learns that while it is important to be at the top of the class, it is also important to be humble and kind. I liked this story very much."

Lurie began working on the project in November 2007, designed a flyer to send out a month later, and started her e-mail appeals in January 2008.

"There weren't really any difficulties but it was hard packaging all of the tens of thousands of books," says Lurie, adding that she never despaired. "My family supported me a lot in this effort. My mom helped me with e-mailing people, and setting up the shipping dates for the books and their packaging. My grandmother donated tons of dictionaries and the rest of my family gave many books for the library."

With a tremendous response from her friends and well-wishers, Lurie was able to collect books on a wide range of subjects. Disney Books and Scholastic Publishers pitched in, too.

Lurie visited India for the library's opening. "This was my first visit to India," she says. "The people are so kind. I talked to all the kids but they did not always know what I was saying. They told me their names and how old they were and what grade they were in."

Lurie and her mother got to know of Global Literacy Project's work in 2006 when they heard how sophomore Christina Vanech, her family and peers at the Pingry School in New Jersey worked with the organization and other schools in the area to collect and ship thousands of books to disadvantaged students in Johannesburg, South Africa. "Literacy stimulates development and creates new opportunities for advancement," says Ramsamy.

The Global Literacy Project was started in the 1990s by a group of young people from different countries who were all students at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. It has shipped more than a million books and established libraries in East Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Tobago and South Africa.

"It is imperative for children and young people to do community service projects, especially when they are as lucky as Milena, to be born having choices," says her mother, Christina Weiss Lurie. "There are a million worthwhile projects out there. It ultimately depends on what excites the young person's imagination."

Milena Lurie loves books herself. "My favorite books are *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*," she says. She would like to tell young people who are not literate yet "to start with picture books and make your way to books that have words. It is a real gift being able to read."

Vaidehi Iyer is a journalist and editor based in Chennai.