

# From Zambia to Benning Road

Library Activists Visit New Benning Library

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ



CLOCKWISE from TOP

1. Library and literacy activists from two continents enjoy a morning with east of the river students.
2. Mulenga Kapwepwe and Danny Glover read to children at Benning Neighborhood Library, April 15.
3. Jane Meyers, Librarian for the Lubuto Project shows east of the river students Zambia on an atlas. Actor-Humanitarian Danny Glover looks on.



learn to read, to express themselves through arts – opportunities that make a lifelong difference. But I’ve also learned that we all have something to share.”

Mulenga – easier for English speakers than “Kapwepwe,” she says – is chairperson of the National Arts Council of Zambia and founding advisory board member of Lubuto. “Lubuto” means “knowledge” or “light” in the Bemba language of central Africa. The project provides high-quality, open-access libraries to vulnerable youth. The libraries provide a safe haven, educational opportunities and “the simple pleasure of books and the arts to children who find themselves alone in the world.”

While in DC, Mulenga visited the Benning library, one of the city’s newest facilities. “The Library, like Lubuto, wants libraries to provide a place to relate to books and a doorway to the arts,” said DCPL’s Pamela Stovall.

Actor-humanitarian Danny Glover joined Mulenga in reading to east of the river students and answering questions. They were introduced by James Early of the Smithsonian’s Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies.

“These people are already inside you,” Early told the children. “They were once your age....And one day we will hear you on the radio – like Mulenga Kapwepwe – talking about culture or in TV and movies, like Danny Glover. You will take a lot of responsibility, just like they do now.”

## Pictures of Africa

Many of the event participants attend an African-centered school, Kuumba Learning Center in Ward 8. Still, the most common question for Mulenga, from students in pre-K to grade 6, was how she got to Africa.

“I was born in Africa. I flew in an airplane a long, long way to get here,” she explained again and again.

“As a kid, I saw Tarzan movies, and I thought that’s what Africa meant,” Glover said after the event. “When African independence was in the news, when I was 12, I saw a different picture.” Ghana, Morocco and Tunisia all gained independence from colonial powers in the 1950s, Zambia and other countries in the 1960s. “So I had to reconcile the two pictures. It

“There is nobody who has nothing,” says Mulenga Kapwepwe, who works with challenged young people in her native Zambia and recently visited Washington, DC, including a visit to Benning Neighborhood Library. “The Lubuto Library Project works with children who are out of school, on the streets. Young people come to us very much in need. We help them

was a step in my growth.”

“We can assume that there will be a connection here,” Glover continued. “These young people met a woman who looks like them but has a different accent. And they saw children like them [in a Lubuto video]. African-centered schooling will set the stage for more growth.”

“Many of our issues are the same,” Mulenga added. “Kids everywhere are honest and frank and open...and they face some of the same challenges.... We can do a lot for each other, despite the miles.”

### Connecting Despite the Miles

At the U.S. Library of Congress, Mulenga found books in each of the seven major national languages of Zambia. There are more than 70 languages in her country, she told the children, but seven are used commonly in the media and in schools.

“This is brilliant,” Mulenga declared. “When I get home, I will talk to publishers about re-launching these. It is difficult to learn to read in a second language, like English. This will make a big difference.”

Individuals and groups in DC are also encouraged to help build connections through book drives and other activities. Visit [www.Lubuto.org](http://www.Lubuto.org) for details or write to Lubuto Library Project, 5505 Connecticut Ave., NW, #368, Washington, DC 20015-2601.

In response to a child’s request, Glover said that his next movie will be about children, adding, “Many of my movies are ones children should not see as children. But movies are an important way to tell stories.” And stories are what both DCPL and Lubuto most hope to share.

*The new Benning Neighborhood Library is open Mon., Wed., and Sat., from 9:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m., and Tue. and Thu., from 1:00 - 9:00 p.m. Call 202-281-2583 or visit [dclibrary.org](http://dclibrary.org) for more information. ★*



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