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Pearland man praised for opening library in Cameroon

By KATRINA KATSARELIS, Houston Chronicle correspondent

It takes a visit inside to see why Pearland resident Michael Fonge is so proud of a nondescript yellow building in Buea, a city in the West African nation of Cameroon.

Shelves lining the inner walls are filled with more than 12,000 books. The building also contains a few computers, a television with a videocassette recorder, and dozens of tables and chairs.

They are there because Fonge, 45, has spent five years and more than \$60,000 of his own money to open the new Buea Metropolitan Library - one of the first in Cameroon.

Fonge, a sociology professor at Houston Community College, purchased hundreds of books at garage and clearance sales and received thousands of surplus book donations stores and individuals.

From the day the library's doors opened on June 20, the building has been flooded with patrons.

"I thought the library would be used by people who can read and write, but the biggest surprise is mothers who cannot read and write will bring their children to the library," Fonge said. "To me, that was the most rewarding and surprising thing."

Some of the Cameroonians didn't understand where the books came from.

"They thought I was this really well-to-do person," he said, laughing. "But I explained to them that these books were from the goodness of the American people."

Many people came to the library just to shake his hand and express appreciation. Others came by wanting to know when he would open additional libraries in the region.

Fonge was born in Kumba, an English-speaking area of Cameroon where he grew up in extreme poverty. In 1977, he came to the United States at age 17 to attend seminary school in North Carolina.

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A year later, he moved to Texas and transferred to the University of Houston, where he worked his way through college as a taxi driver. After receiving a doctorate degree, Fonge began his career as a sociology professor.

When he made a trip back to Cameroon in the late '80s, this time as an educator, he was appalled by the lack of available reading materials. He went to the area's only library - at the University of Buea - only to find a meager selection of outdated books.

Several years later on a subsequent visit, he brought a shipment of books with him and distributed them to a few schools and hospitals. The community response was so overwhelming he felt compelled to do more. Fonge set a goal to open a library in the area.

When he returned to the United States, he began soliciting books from anywhere he could. He spent every weekend at garage sales and auctions or driving to bookstores asking for surplus books.

The Half-Price Books stores in Clear Lake and the Montrose area became two of Fonge's largest contributors, donating thousands of books on an ongoing basis.

Fonge's Africa Project has become a family affair. His wife, Anne, works two jobs to help fund the project. and his teenage children, Susan and John, have spent many hours sorting, labeling and boxing books for shipment.

In May, Fonge and his wife returned to Cameroon and recruited about 25 volunteers to unload the books, stock the shelves, and prepare the library to open.

Incentives to read

The library's patrons, according to Fonge, include preschoolers, pastors, elementary students and physicians. Of all the books on the shelves, Fonge says the highest in demand turned out to be cookbooks, agricultural books and do-it-yourself handyman guides.

The library was set up with a children's section containing more than 2,000 books and a media area with a television and videocassette recorder.

The staff plays Sesame Street videos to attract local children and encourage them to become regular visitors of the library.

While in Cameroon, Fonge and the library staff teamed up with the local Parent Teacher's Association and visited many elementary schools offering incentives such as free pencils or pens for children who visit the library.

Next year, Fonge plans to expand the program and supply books to the local elementary schools as well.

Currently, less than 10 percent of Cameroon's schools have on-site libraries. "We are targeting very young children to get them reading early," he said. Challenges ahead

Fonge is pleased the library is finally up and running but said he still has far to go. He will return to Cameroon in December with another shipment.



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He is trying to get more books and wants to provide 20 to 30 computers that he intends to connect for Internet access.

"One of the major things people are requesting is computers," he said. "My goal is to convert it to an electronic library."

The three computers now in the library are not connected to the Internet.

Expense is the main problem, Fonge said. In Cameroon, it will cost \$3,000 to \$4,000 just to get Internet access for the computers, not including monthly service fees.

Because books are so high in demand in the area, theft and vandalism are other problems. The library requires a security guard around the clock. No electronic theft-prevention system in place; so Fonge expects to lose about 10 percent of the books each year to theft.

"We can help to reduce theft. There's no way right now to eliminate it," he said.

To cover the cost of the eight library staff workers and building expenses, patrons pay a library usage fee equivalent to about 10 cents per day. So far, the fee has not come close to meeting the cost of expenses; so Fonge has been supplementing the difference out of his own pocket.

After transforming the Buea library into an electronic library, he would like to begin placing computers with Internet access in the local schools as well.

"It feels good to open the library, but I have not really gotten to a point where I want to be. It's mentally stressful because you start something and you don't think it will ever get this far," Fonge said. "When I start something, I like to see it finished."

Fonge is accepting books and donations of all kinds. He is particularly interested in computers that are less than two years old.

He can be contacted at 281-451-9640 or via email at booksnthingsus@yahoo.com.

CAMEROON SNAPSHOT

Area: 183,568 square miles (slightly larger than California)

Capital: Yaounde

Largest city: Douala

Population: 15.8 million (July 2001 est.)

Life expectancy at birth: 54.6 years

Adult literacy: 63.4%

Population below poverty line: 48% (2000 est.)

Official languages: English, French

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