

## Profiles of Service Excellence

### Volunteer Spotlight April Grigsby

For our Volunteer Spotlight Series, we will showcase the dedication and service of the extraordinary women who have been spearheading the foundation's core programs and contributing to our mission. We interviewed each of these Trailblazers, and discovered that rooted in their hearts is an unwavering commitment to service, collective wisdom and inspiration to give back and prepare our children for the future. This is part two of a three part series.

With a global outlook and passion for social impact, April Grigsby has been leading the Books Across Africa project as its Chair since May 2010. The Book's Across Africa Project was first launched in 2001 by the Frazier Educational Enterprises Foundation to increase the supply of books and help support schools and libraries located in rural villages in The Gambia, West Africa. In 2005, the Five Pearls Foundation joined forces as a partner to this project, expanding the Foundation's global impact and breadth. Accompanied by a personal affinity towards The Gambia and the West African region after a one-year trip to the region post her University studies, April has remained committed to channeling her interest in international development through the program's core mission of empowering young women with the knowledge required to help them grow and become more informed about the larger world. With this long-standing commitment to service across a global framework, April attests to how valuable her experience has been working with the Five Pearls Foundation, enriching her passion to help build and improve the lives of the women in the villages in The Gambia.

From a service standpoint, April reflects on her personal and spiritual beliefs that enabled her to find her niche focusing on unique projects having global impact. "I believe in Tikkun olam. Tikkun olam is a Jewish term meaning "repair the world" and speaks to social action as a part of our responsibility for our time here on earth. I try to be the change that I want to see as Ghandi said and I enjoy doing it. The Books Across Africa project is focused on West Africa, whereas all our other programs have local impact."

Having experienced first-hand, during a brief stay in South Africa, how education can be used as a platform to elevate those in rural villages and change their status in life, April maintains that "you can't rely solely on oral tradition in these communities and on old models of thinking. You need to pull in a lot of different types of donors, people who like books, people who understand how important it is to promote literacy for women. For women in these communities, it is important that they embrace the importance and need for to read books."

In regards to fueling her decision to serve as a strong advocate for women in The Gambia, April reflects on how reading has instilled within her hope and the ability to experience both joy and freedom on a personal level. She also maintains that sharing the liberating feelings she experienced with the women in The Gambia was further facilitated through close partnership and execution of the foundation's mission. "I lived in Ghana after I completed my undergraduate studies so I have a strong affinity towards West Africa. I am a voracious reader and have experienced true freedom through reading. I wanted to share that freedom and joy. I knew that this was a tangible capacity building project for a people that are

near and dear to me so it made sense. The Five Pearls Foundation as the 501 (c) 3 of the sorority chapter, Sigma Nu Zeta, is the not-for-profit arm of the chapter, so I support the vision of the chapter and work within the Five Pearls Foundation to execute that vision.”

Furthermore, April enthuses that as women, we have the opportunity to speak to each other across the divides and that we have a lot in common. “Women are concerned about their households, which is their children and their communities. It resonates globally, when women can step outside of norms and barriers to head to the library and share their experiences seeking ways to improve their current conditions and seek a better future for their children. I am a woman so I understand that there are barriers that women face based on gender. It makes sense to collaborate with other women because we have that shared prospective.”

April elaborates on these barriers by touching on the common struggles that mothers face and how women’s organizations can help to address and promote sustainable impact via grassroots initiatives. “It is important for me to work with a women’s organization, because as women, we can identify with the struggles of other women, in particular struggling as mothers. I think it creates a lot more opportunities for smaller and sustainable impact because it is using a grassroots approach.

Furthermore, she sheds light on how grassroots efforts appeal to her, through opportunities to build and integrate those initiatives into larger systems and planting interventions about change. “It takes a while to change. We can finish this project, we can get libraries fully resourced with books. You need these finite projects to help continue the mission and serve as the motivating factor to become change agents over the long-term.”

When asked about what advice she has for youth looking to volunteer or have greater impact on their communities, April states “find what you are good at-something that is reflective of you; then find a people, place or thing that will benefit from you doing what you are good at so that you will do it often, effectively and with a smile on your face.”

“For me, I liked books and tied this to my experiences in West Africa. If you like makeup,...and have a passion for it, it can be vehicle for a greater cause, whether it be coordinating makeovers for breast cancer survivors at screenings or helping survivors build their self-confidence as they undergo the emotional journey and changes.”

“You will ultimately find yourself through commitment to service, you will do larger things and have greater impact, whether it be for the short or long-term. For short-term goals, it may help to partner with others who are working towards achieving greater impact.”

As for her vision defining how she sees the program evolving within the next five years, April enthuses: “I want to complete the goal we have set for stocking 80 rural libraries and then we can take the project to another country. We need more volunteers and more shipping donations so that we can get the books there faster.”

She also elaborates on her plans to execute a seamless transition with the process and developing new

methods to drive efficiency. “I want to get it down to have the transition from one storage unit shipping donations to women-I want it to be a seamless process, get that transformed, get that together. There is definitely a lot to be said about delegating and to get some income-generating activities to pay for some of the steps to be fulfilled quicker over the long-term.”

April closes by describing the possibilities that reading and books have opened and hopes to continue that energy through the Books Across Africa Project. “You can stay stationed in the same place physically, but can think about the world in different ways...(books) encourage people to think beyond their current circumstances and participate in the world. You’ve been somewhere...Your mind goes places. Expand your horizons.”