

## From OOS to the Mountain Kingdom: Lessons in listening, learning, and supporting communities

By Rebekka Wallace Roy

Lesotho, known as the Mountain Kingdom, is a striking high-altitude nation entirely surrounded by South Africa.

My family recently returned from an 8-day visit to Lesotho with Help Lesotho, a Canadian charity founded more than 20 years ago by Ottawa's Dr. Peg Herbert. My husband, Marc-André, serves on the Board, which includes directors from Lesotho, South Africa, and Canada – an intentional reflection of the organization's commitment to shared governance and local leadership. We joined Help Lesotho's annual donor trip to witness programs firsthand and learn more about the Basotho community.

As a social worker trained in trauma-informed and nervous system-centred approaches, I approached the trip with a few questions: How can donor travel avoid being performative? And, how do we witness the work without imposing our own frameworks or expectations? Help Lesotho offered some surprising answers.

Lesotho faces serious structural challenges. Poverty is widespread,

and unemployment is high, worsened by recent U.S. tariffs on the country's textile sector – the largest export industry. Global attention briefly spiked after President Trump publicly referenced the country in the State of the Union address, further disrupting an already fragile sector. HIV prevalence is roughly 20% of the population, and over 80% of women have experienced sexual, physical, or emotional violence, according to the UN. Many children are separated from parents who have migrated to South Africa and beyond for work and are raised by grandparents or other caregivers, or in some cases, navigate long periods of "independence." Even amid these pressures, Lesotho's communities remain strong, grounded in cultural traditions and long-standing practices of mutual care – strengths that ethical development must build upon rather than override.

That's what sets Help Lesotho apart. Under the leadership of Kate Lambert and Sello Matsoso, Help Lesotho delivers long-term, community-led programs provided by Basotho – more than 80% of whom are alumni themselves. Programs support multiple generations



The "Guys 4 Good" boys (a Help Lesotho program) joined us for a hike to London, a neighbouring village. My inner Scout leader came out as we sang camp songs and shared language. For instance, "noha" means snake (we found one on the trail, and the boys lovingly handed it to me during the hike). Some things are universal for 12-year-old kids!

simultaneously: grandmothers, young mothers, adolescents, and children, strengthening families and communities together.

### A different way to be visitors

Help Lesotho offered us a different way to engage as visitors. We were welcomed into spaces where participation was intentional and respectful, and where our role as visitors was determined by the Basotho staff and community. We met young mothers whose year-long programs had expanded their sense of possibility; grandmothers who shared how family support programs strengthened household stability; and adolescents, and young men – often referred to locally as herd boys, who live in isolation in the mountains, and are frequently excluded from formal education systems – participating in leadership, gender equity, and community connection programs.

One moment particularly stands out for me. During a session with the herd boys, when the energy in the room began to drift, the facilitator called for a song. Within seconds, the boys stood, and the room filled with layered, call-and-response singing. I learned how singing is deeply woven into local culture – it marks beginnings, transitions, releases tension, and builds connection. Seeing it used this way was one of the most powerful moments of collective energy I have experienced in a group setting. It was a reminder that advanced, nervous-system based facilitation can be culturally grounded and incredibly effective – something many of us in psychosocial and trauma-informed fields could take away.

Our family also participated in ways centred on learning and sharing. Marc-André joined youth in Help Lesotho's employment training program to discuss entrepreneurship and digital tools for small businesses. Felix played soccer and chess with the kids after school. I spent time with the psychosocial support

team – social workers, educators, and students who are often first responders – sharing trauma-informed, mindfulness approaches and strategies for sustaining ourselves in emotionally demanding work.

### About Help Lesotho and why it works

Help Lesotho currently reaches roughly 2,200 direct beneficiaries annually, touches over 25,000 people each year, and has impacted more than 300,000 lives since it began. Long-term outcomes are tangible: a former herd boy we met had been sponsored through high school, participated in leadership programs, and is now a physician. Another man, whom we randomly ran into at a restaurant, credited the organization with helping him become a cardiologist. These were not isolated tales.

Education sponsorship is a direct way to expand opportunity. At roughly \$560 per year, secondary school access remains financially out of reach for many due to systemic barriers. Our family sponsors a 17-year-old Grade 10 student. Visiting him underscored those disparities: because his parents work far away, he lives independently while attending school, managing responsibilities most Canadian teens could scarcely imagine.

Help Lesotho's annual budget is approximately C\$1.7 million, with roughly 90% going directly to programming. It receives almost no government funding and relies heavily on donations from individuals and foundations – in Canada and beyond.

For those who believe global solidarity should extend beyond our borders, Help Lesotho offers a thoughtful and accountable avenue for engagement. Its annual donor trip is open to the public each

Continued on pg. 37

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**Continued from pg. 36**

March and costs ~\$5-6K. It provides supporters the opportunity to learn about the work firsthand through a model designed around transparency, relationship-building, and local leadership.

If travel is not the right fit, there are many other ways to support the work: donating, sponsoring a student, volunteering professional skills, or simply learning more and sharing the organization’s mission.

**Elephant in the room**

For those who ask, “Why support communities in Lesotho when there is poverty, violence, and inequity in our own backyard?” it’s a valid question. However, I do not see it as an either/or situation. Supporting local programs in Ottawa and engaging globally are complementary. They are part of the same commitment: to learn, to listen, and to invest in humanity wherever we can. Witnessing development in Lesotho offered insights we could bring home, reminding us how culture shapes healing and showing us approaches to psychosocial care and community resilience that are both inspiring and transferable.

Lesotho has definitely left its mark



*The Young Mothers come together after a delicious lunch and a fascinating discussion around the myths of reproductive health and STIs.*

PHOTOS BY REBEKKA WALLACE ROY

on me – not because it offered easy inspiration, but because it reminded me that real development is about learning from one another, building relationships across borders, and

amplifying local knowledge. It is about partnership, not rescue; about strengthening communities already rich with insight, knowledge, and collaborative capacity. That is what meaningful, ethical, human-centred

development looks like.

If you’d like more information, please visit [www.helplesotho.com](http://www.helplesotho.com).

*Rebekka Wallace Roy lives in OOS.*

**SUNNYSIDE LIBRARY BRANCH**

**75th anniversary of Sunnyside branch**



*The Ottawa Public Library’s Sunnyside branch celebrated its 75th anniversary. On Saturday, March 28, 2026, the community was invited to gather at the Sunnyside branch for a day of family-friendly programming.*

PHOTOS FROM OTTAWA PUBLIC LIBRARY



*(Above) The best part of the day – cake time!  
 (Top left) Cake cutting with OPL Board Trustee Slack, Councillor Menard, Charlotte Halstead, Sunnyside branch coordinator, Matt Luloff, Chair of OPL Board and Councillor for Orléans-East-Cumberland, Jessica Bradley, OPL Board Trustee and Councillor for Gloucester-Southgate, OPL Board Vice-Chair Kathy Fisher, Rawlson King, OPL Board Trustee and Councillor for Rideau-Rockcliffe, and finally, Sonia Bebbington, CEO and Chief Librarian, OPL.  
 (Left) Library clients celebrating 75th anniversary of Sunnyside branch.*