



# 2007

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## January 18 2007

Happy New Year. The two weeks since my arrival in Lesotho have flown by. Meetings with government officials, preparations for the HL annual Leadership Camp, administrative duties, staff debriefings and volunteer training have filled each day. If I have not responded to your emails, please forgive me, and I will do so as soon as I am able.

Lesotho is in the full bloom of summer; the days are warm and sunny for the most part. The hibiscuses, roses, unnamed flowers are in full regalia. The land seems blessed this season with rain and sun to a healthy measure. It rains almost daily – at times with the full force of nature: there are more people killed in Lesotho by lightning than in any other country. I assume that it is the combination of altitude, aridity and deforestation. It can be a terrifying thing.

Yesterday was the final day of our six-day Leadership Camp in Pitseng. Pitseng is a beautiful mountain village in which we have four HL schools. Funded by donations and individual child sponsors, the camp provides fun sessions on HIV/AIDS, gender, problem solving, goal setting, communication, etc., culminating in an opportunity to test for HIV.

This camp was twice the size of last year’s, with about 250 participants. Individuals and groups came from all of our nine communities in the mountains to attend. Kids have been looking forward to this for a whole year. Teachers and principals, young Anglican and Catholic nuns, and our new and existing YAH

(Youth Against HIV/AIDS youth in our CIDA-funded project with the Institute on Governance) members also came. Masonville Manor in London sent ten students in all. One donor sent ten herself. Each school is allowed to choose two boys and two girls who have exhibited strong leadership in their schools. Each may send two teachers. The orphanage can send two nuns and eight children. Each religious congregation is allowed six young nuns. The YAH members and volunteers numbered 40 themselves. It is a strange but welcome group arriving from near and far.

It is difficult to express how transformative this experience is. To be in a place where you are truly wanted, celebrated, fed and nurtured allows adults and children alike to blossom. It is a happy place where the pain of orphans, grieving mothers and fathers, and overburdened teachers can take a hiatus from the struggle to learn and grow. When we privately handed out the letters and small gifts that some of our sponsors sent to their children, one overlooked the gifts at first, clutching the photo as if her life depended on it. She looked at me with tears in her eyes and knew that she was loved.

Our staff was remarkable during the Leadership Camp. Leslie Power took the lead on the organization and did a terrific job. She has worked for months on the logistics of bringing so many from a myriad of locations with more transportation problems than I can describe. Konesoang, Carolyn, Donna, Leslie, Tlalane, Bohang and I were entirely supported by our volunteers: Penney Place, Surita Parashar, Nick Barber, Dan King and Adrian Gregorich. Penney was in charge of the kitchen and meals – what a job. She had a large contingent of helpers, but it is really a ton of work with very long hours. The food was great, and all were so appreciative to have three meals a day. Our senior YAH members (Matseko, Setloke, Palesa, Mampoi, Lebohang and Khutliso) were unbelievable. I have seen these young people from the first day of their training emerge from shy, often broken souls to become fine, strong, reliable and, frankly, inspirational leaders in one year. They have influenced so many young people in their communities.

It was a tremendous amount of work with few resources, but the camp was an unqualified success. During the opening ceremonies the winners of the Shelagh M’Gonigle Speaker’s Prize and the Kathleen Lauder Scholarship were announced. The two winners read their speeches. Winners and runners-up were given medallions (made by Penney), certificates, acclamation, a flashlight (donated by Tessa and Mark Bell), and a book in which to write their thoughts. The two winners each received a cash prize of M500 (approx \$84). One was going to use the money for new glasses. One will put the money toward her school fees (she is not a sponsored child). Their home villagers were so proud of them, claiming ownership as one does of an Olympic winner (the speeches, written by Puleng and Manolefi) are on the website for all to read.

Each child at the camp wrote a speech on the last two days. When I return, I will ask volunteers to type up the speeches, as we have done in the past. The group of speeches called Step Out and Speak Up will be made into small books, posted on the Web and distributed throughout our network in both countries. These young ones now have a voice and will be able to read each other’s convictions.

My joy was to spend time with the teachers and students, to hear their stories and their progress, to remind them that people – often that one person in Canada – care about them and believes that they can be a leader. This constant juxtaposition between the exuberance of watching people grow and take charge of their lives and the unfolding of personal stories in this atmosphere of trust and nurture is challenging. Within half an hour one day, I listened to a principal tell me of the death of her only two children, each at the age of one year, with her refrain, “What can be wrong with me?” Another principal,

younger than me, confided that she had just buried the second of her only two grandchildren three days before the camp.

On Saturday, five people had to leave because they received an urgent message of a family death. It is not always of AIDS; sometimes it is in a car accident on these perilous roads. Many children told us of the four/five/seven siblings left at home who could not attend school because of poverty. They did not mean to ask but felt disloyal to their siblings if they did not try to gain sponsorship for them, and I think perhaps they felt a bit guilty that they were the chosen ones. It is so difficult for all – for them to admit and risk offending us in asking, for us to hear and not be able to respond. The need is so great and our resources are few.

On the opposite side, we hear tales of change, emerging confidence, renewed hope that brings tears of joy to one's eyes. Even as I write this, the combined travails and transformations fill the spirit with compassion, thanksgiving and determination. Change is possible and can be done with a small amount of money. Each child, teacher, nun, youth is so important, so eager to grow and become someone who can help this beleaguered nation.

We invited a number of prestigious guests and were actually surprised when they came. The local chief arrived, all dressed up. The equivalent of a provincial premier and his two top people came from one province (called Districts) and the chief legal officer from another. Our plan was that our guests should join in a session and simply be a part of what we were doing. The irony was that the five government officials chose to come to my session with the nuns and teachers on *The Use of Power in Authority!!!!* I had to laugh. If I had orchestrated it, we could not have had a better opportunity to influence them. They knew this was not put on for their benefit and so were not defensive. I was incredulous at their praise after the session and their thoughtful discussion on how they would pass this on to their colleagues. Who would have thought! As I was giving the talk, I was acutely aware that I might offend them and was relieved that they were so positive. Whew!

Help Lesotho is one of the partners with Algonquin College, Ottawa, Expedition Africa, which has been going through Africa taking videos and sending real-time footage to partners in Canada. There are five school boards in which these exchanges are happening. The crew, led by Ben Webster, was at the camp for a day and a half filming and interviewing. They were great to work with. We were to be on the Ottawa news last night and in the *Ottawa Sun* Sunday edition this week. They were a pleasure to have, fit in easily and were so keen on helping us reach people with the story of what we are doing. If you are interested, you can go to [www.algonquincollege.com/Africa](http://www.algonquincollege.com/Africa).

Our schedule provided extensive HIV/AIDS education, which included four people living with AIDS from a local support group. They came a day early, joined the groups as visitors, and when they declared their status at the start of their sessions, our participants were amazed. These people were just like them and could not have been identified as having AIDS. The sessions were so powerful. One young male teacher confided that this was the first time he had ever heard someone admit to being HIV-positive and how this had changed his life. The two men and two women were so incredible. This is what will change Lesotho – when people have the support to stand up and admit they are positive and that they are able to live a full life.

When it came time to test, we provided many distraction games and events so that people could slip in. It was wonderful. *All* principals (almost all for the first time), almost all teachers (other than the ones who knew they were positive), and so many students tested during the last two days. Even the women in the

kitchen and a gardener asked and tested. All the young nuns tested, determined to go back to their congregations and tell of what they had learned. This will change the lives of their friends, their families and their communities. They now have the knowledge, the confidence and the experience to stand up and speak out about the crisis and the ravage it renders.

Our last night was a traditional Canadian camp bonfire, complete with hot chocolate and marshmallows. The HL team had prepared a dozen camp songs, albeit in one practice session only (Adrian and Nick were a huge help on this). We did the duelling camp song challenge. We sang one song, and they responded with one of theirs. We had no illusions that we could compete on any measure or even hold our own. We did not embarrass ourselves however.

We concluded with our respective national anthems. Again – no contest. (Their harmony, dancing, depth of sound is an experience I hope to be able to bring home with our new mini-disc donated by Frances and Alvin Reimer and their colleagues at the Western Conservatory of Music.) All were delighted and touched. The camp is such an overwhelmingly positive experience. We see its transformative effect on all of us. We all pledged to change and grow to help this struggling country. We are bonded in our love for the children, and we are blessed to be here.

Two young nuns, Sr. Victoria and Sr. Xenia, are going to the orphanage to help Sr. Margaret. Both were at the camp and are determined to be good leaders. We will help them set up an HIV/AIDS Club for the children and perhaps peer tutoring sessions. The need is great and they are willing. This will be a blessing for the orphanage. I know they will miss Sr. Daphne, but I am sure this will be a good team.

I am hiding in my bedroom now to write this letter. There are so many people around, and it is hard to find a quiet moment. A principal of one of our schools just came to give me some requested information. In the middle of our conversation, she broke down in tears. This incredibly strong leader could barely speak. She confided to me that she herself is an orphan and had no one to care for or love her as she grew up. She was only able to finish Grade 7. She was married off at the age of 18 to an older man who had no job and no education but who had some cattle her extended family wanted as the bride prize. She has had a hard life.

She continued to take correspondence courses as she taught and raised her own children, scraping the money from her grocery money. She became a principal, with four children, managing a school, taking courses and helping her community. Her husband died; people stole her animals. It has been hard. She spoke so softly, this large and powerful woman I love. She said that until she met me, she had never had anyone really care for her. The benefits her school has had through Help Lesotho have proven to her that she is cared about, and she pledges to do everything within her power to make her school proud of us. She is herself especially kind to orphans, as she knows their loneliness and suffering.

It would break your heart to hear her story and see her proud face gleaming with fresh and rarely permitted tears. She is a woman without self-pity but only appreciation and determination. As she struggles for the words to express, we hold hands and end our conversation with a prayer. She asks God to make her a strong leader and give her the strength to lead for all good in her school and her community. For the first time, I asked her to do something for me. I asked her to direct her teachers to be positive to the children, not to use harsh language or punitive measures. I asked that she insist the children be treated with kindness and no more corporal punishment. She has vowed to do this.

As I write, I realize how inadequate my words are to convey to you how many lives are being changed, encouraged and supported. I write to you knowing that you have worked hard for these people in some capacity, and I so wish to convey their appreciation to you. I do not have the space in these letters or the time to always write to you individually with all I would like to say about how you have helped these children. You are making a huge difference with your contribution. Thank you! *Kea leboha!*

## January 23 2007

The land is wet in the bright sunlight, recovering from a frenetic storm of torrential rain and frightening lightning last night. The air is clear and refreshing. All seems renewed.

Today, Penney continues to work on preparing the orphan kits HL gives to primary school sponsored children. We all love to see the supplies build in the office: washcloths, toothbrushes and paste, school supplies, backpacks, pens and pencils, underwear and socks, a new pair of shoes to walk the dusty miles to and from school, a sweater and track suit, soap for washing clothes and bodies, candles to allow them to do their homework in the dark. Somehow the concrete nature of these wee things is comforting. The mother in us wants to care for the children at this level of nurturing. They will get their uniforms from the school.

School starts this week. We have so many children to register, school fees to pay. This is a busy time for our staff, and the volunteers pitch in where they can. Without a truck, we are at the painful limitations of public transport to deliver all these things throughout the mountains. It is not easy, and Penney has taken the lead on helping.

Adrian, Nick and Surita have gone to Pitseng. Each day, they will work with Basotho youth to build pit latrines (outhouses) at a small Anglican school, Raphoka, twinned with a school on Salt Spring Island. This will be the first time the school has had any place for the children to go to the bathroom. The funds for materials were raised by Marion Myles, and the latrines will be built by the villagers.

Our office is inundated with people begging for sponsorship – all ages and stages. We have 19-year-olds (male and female) asking for sponsorship to Grade 8. This is hard, as most people in Canada do not want to sponsor an older student, and yet we celebrate the courage and determination of these young people for wanting to go to school – even with the little ones. Many are really bright and have just never had a chance.

Clearly the needs are beyond our capacity to address. We only have so many sponsors, only so much in our Orphan Relief Fund for the small things that they so desperately need (glasses, medication, money for transport, etc.). As you can imagine, it is hard on our staff to turn people away, to choose one child over another.

We have been struggling with the best approach for our granny programs. As well as individual donors, HL has three large and wonderful granny groups raising a lot of money: the Raging Grannies on Salt Spring Island, the Solar Grannies in Alberta and Manitoba and the Kingston Grandmothers' Connection in Ontario. They have taken this so to heart and work tirelessly to raise significant funds for the grannies.

The situation for these grannies is haunting. Many are really old and are tasked with raising their orphaned grandchildren while they grieve for the loss of often all their own children. They have no

money to meet the needs of the children. We have a solar granny program, which gives them solar cookers to avoid the cost and toxicity of cooking with paraffin, cow dung, etc. These dear souls worry constantly about the future of the orphans. Some have two; others, five; some, fourteen. They ruminate on what will happen to these children when they die. It burdens their heart and raises their blood pressure. When we ask the grannies what they want most to help, they always say the same thing. They tell us that their hope, dream, prayer and plea is that their grandchildren can go to school. As our Grandmother Support Programs grows, we are ever more convinced that the best way to support these grannies is to send their grandchildren to school.

This provides a future for them. The orphans get a new uniform, shoes and a sweater so the burden of clothing is taken off (even if the child has only this, it can be worn seven days a week), and the children are busy with productive things. Grannies tell us that they worry endlessly as they watch the children get depressed staying at home year after year with nothing to do. In this pre-psychology culture, this is a profound statement, and we know that it is true. Keeping the children in school benefits them in all dimensions of well-being and has so many protective factors that it seems the best use of the funds we collect. This can save hundreds of children in the most sustainable way. We have named a new fund Granny's Child under our Grandmother Support Program to address the need. We hope that funders will understand this logic and the burden this approach will take from the grannies. In some cases, it is worth the extra funds to actually take the child from the home into a boarding situation so that the grandmother can manage. Some are on the verge of just falling apart and will break down altogether if we do not intervene.

For example, a grandmother approached us today for sponsorship of a young girl going into Grade 9 (Form B). She told us, through an interpreter, of the death of her two daughters. Her haltering voice was difficult to hear as she opened her heart to tell of her grief and loss. What was she to do? Each of her children had left her grandchildren bereft and without support. She now cared for three grandchildren orphaned by this killer AIDS, with no resources to offer them. She told us of the eldest, Ntsatsi, and how smart she was. She finished per previous year with excellent marks. Tears moistened the grandmother's as she expressed her longing that this child should have an opportunity to finish high school and that this would position her to help her siblings when the grandmother died.

A familiar story but, on an individual level, it left us all with an aching heart for this brave woman who had to confess her despair and poverty to perfect strangers. She is trying to avoid borrowing money for exorbitant interest rates and has little hope of paying it back. Our decision to sponsor this child gave hope and a purpose to the whole family. By helping her do well at school, somehow they were all elevated and would have some semblance of a future. One child of so many! Her appreciation was visible and palpable. It is a good day when we can save a family, especially a grandmother, by saving one child. All our hard work is redeemed by this one act. We must celebrate each child and know that it is good in itself. Thinking of the multitude left in this very position is just too much to deal with on a given day.

Although I write to you from this tiny mountain kingdom, so far from home, I am daily touched by the outpouring of interest and care for these children. For example, a lovely and very brave woman I admire, who is fighting with her third bout of cancer, wrote: "Bit tired but really nothing at all to complain about. Everyone has something to test them – cancer is mine. The great news is that I will soon have enough money with the new job to support an orphan in Lesotho....Yeah! I will send you the money as soon as I get a few pay cheques and am caught up."

A multiple orphan sponsor, Naida Hyde, who is coming soon to work with various civil society partners with our YAH project, wrote: “As for people wanting to donate, I am finding that the people with the fewest resources are offering. At the stationery store, the tired, grey, middle-aged woman who served me who looked like she had been on her feet her whole life in minimum wage jobs, helped me carry out all the things to my car, hesitated and then reached into her pocket and handed me a very old folded up \$10.00 bill, saying that it would help me in buying all the paper, etc. It nearly broke my heart, expanded my heart, with the gratitude I felt, tears filling my eyes then and now. And a young woman client in Vancouver who can barely meet her rent each month wants to send money for me to buy beading to help the women doing that work. What a world!”

Even with all the pain we see, there is so much good on both sides of the water.

## January 28 2007

2:30 a.m. My walk to work is both challenging and inspiring. As one dodges the traffic on this cratered road with its almost un-navigable shoulders, there is a point going “down” where one sees a spectacular vista. Each day, it is as if the creator of the universe has changed her mind and painted the mountains in a completely different colour spectrum. One day purples, another, greens and browns. One day greys and blacks; another, blues and pinks. The shadows vary and the depth perspective undulates. What a great way to start the day!

I leave the high point and keep the descent along the warped, dark-red, clay path to the office. It is perilous to take one’s eyes off the spot where you will step next. The final portion is high grass, and I lift my skirt to the knee to keep it from becoming too wet. In one section, the grass is chest high (no, the skirt does not go that high)! The summer dew is thick and impossible to dodge. Our cow “lawn mower” had not been seen for some time, so we had a couple of young men volunteer to sickle the area directly in front of the office. The ground stays too wet, bugs flourish, and some chickens have taken residence. Poor Leslie had a congregation of them squawking one entire night, literally standing on the table that sits outside her window. She ended up throwing rocks at them to get them away! Between the bugs, chickens, rooster calls and occasional rats or mice, it is an eventful place.

Bruce Burbidge has arrived, excited and keen to get to work. He will work on the technical aspects of the two youth and leadership centres we will build in the next two years. Carolyn and I were pathetically delighted to see the large bag of Bridgehead coffee emerge from his second suitcase Phyllis had so lovingly packed. We do not have a lot of treats, and I confess that is my favourite. When I get up in the night to write or work quietly, it is wonderful to have a really good cup of coffee. This is my only quiet time and I love the ritual.

Adrian Gregorich has returned from his week in Pitseng, enamoured of the villagers and having the time of his life. He stayed in Penney’s hut and fell in love with ‘M’e Blandina, who looks after us there. Penney has returned to Pitseng now after helping with the child sponsorship stuff since the camp. Tomorrow morning, Nick, Surita and Tlalane go up to Thaba Tseka to do the two weeks’ reconnaissance in preparation for the two new YAH Committees to start there. Tlalane is a wonder. She works so hard and has changed the lives of many young people. She is entirely reliable, smart and a pleasure to work with.

I go up on February 8 to deliver the three weeks’ training. Nick and Surita have been a great help, always volunteering to do more; pitching in where they can. Our workload is ever impossible, and extra hands

are so appreciated. They are good-natured and kind. There is almost no communication up there. There are no Internet cafes that I know of, unless one has sprung up in the past few months. Cell phone signals only work occasionally and intermittently.

This morning, Leslie, Donna and I go to Maseru. I have a meeting with a professor from Rome who is just arriving from Italy, and the girls are on their way to the airport. We had a farewell Friday and another wee one last night. Donna has been here the best part of the last year. She returns to Canada for a few months and then comes back to Lesotho for a year. She is joining the HL staff as the HIV/AIDS and Gender Equity Officer. She will do programming, proposal writing, etc. We are thrilled to have her on board full-time. Leslie is filled with emotion. She has worked her heart out and has been exposed to the stories of and learned to love dozens and dozens of children. I know that when she goes home, these faces and needs will haunt her.

It is not easy to leave these kids, always wondering if this one got her school books, that one stopped crying, this one found a place to live, this child-headed household survived. It changes us—grows the edges until we are larger than we think we have the capacity to absorb. We fear at times that we will not be able to handle the magnitude of pain we have been exposed to and will miss the joy and tender love of the children. Not easy! Both Donna and Leslie have been outstanding—always supportive, professional and productive. We will all miss them. We have a fabulous team. It seems that, once part of it, one is always so. We still talk about and miss Cliff, Melanie and 'Maseeiso.

Carolyn is working hard on the Child Sponsorship Program. It grows daily and the need is unceasing. We are getting more people coming forward to save these children's futures. She works unstintingly to respond to sponsors and meet the detailed needs of the children. It is challenging and, without our own transport, it is painstaking to do the site visits. For example, six of our St. Mary's girls have changed to a vocational school in Maputsoe. Carolyn had to travel there twice to check it out first. We all dream of getting a truck. It is hard to imagine from the Canadian side how hard it is to afford a vehicle and how hard it is to manage all that we do without one.

I think the Child Sponsorship Program may be one of the most emotional sides of our work. Leslie has been working hard on it for six months with Carolyn. The stories are endless. One situation happened this week that had us all in tears:

Three months ago, Mookho, a young Basotho girl in her late teens, visited the HL office in hopes of receiving support to return to school. Her story broke our hearts. At eight years old, Mookho was awakened one morning in the family's one-room rondaval by the commotion of her two older brothers yelling at her and her young mother weeping on the floor. Mookho's father informed the family in a drunken stupor that he was leaving the family to return to South Africa to work in the mines. Mookho's two brothers were furious, blaming the mother for not being a good wife and forcing their father to leave. After her brothers left the house, Mookho tried to comfort her mother. Her mother pushed her away, stating that if her father could leave, so could she. The next morning Mookho's mother disappeared. Mookho has not seen or heard from her since. At eight, she was left in the care of her two older brothers.

Both brothers dropped out of high school to find any odd jobs they could and were rarely home. Mookho cared for their home and took care of herself. Although the brothers helped with the household expenses, they were emotionally abusive to Mookho, calling her a burden. Mookho retreated to stay at a neighbor's house to avoid their frequent drunken rages. Mookho did, by some miracle, graduate from

primary school with good grades and a dream to go to high school. When a month passed without a sign of her brothers, Mookho expected they would come back as they had so many times before. She started high school, awaiting their return to help with the uniform and school fees. By the second quarter there was still no word of them. Unable to pay the fees, Mookho was forced to leave school. Her brothers never did return. With no other family, she was left to fend for herself. She found a job as a domestic in a family living with and caring for them for years. Her meager R500 a month (CAD \$95) left little for saving for school fees.

As she finished her story, she said, “I want to go to school. I never wanted to leave. I really want to go back to school. Can you help me?” She was matched with a sponsor from Canada within weeks and placed at Pitseng High School, which has boarding to give her a place to live. This young woman has no one.

This is the moment when her life changed! Last week, Mookho quit her job to attend the six-day HL Leadership Camp. At camp, all she could talk about was her excitement to go back to school. She had been studying an old English book for weeks, hoping it would prepare her for classes.

This is the beginning of the Lesotho school year. Last Friday, Sr. Juliet, Principal of Pitseng High School, visited the HL office herself to talk about Mookho. Boarders are expected to arrive a day early to ready the dormitories before classes start. Mookho showed up with no food, mattress, pillow, sheets or toiletries, only a small bag with some clothes and a ragged towel. Stalwart Sr. Juliet was in tears as she described the night before. Mookho had had nothing to eat and was forced to sleep on the rusted metal coil bed frame, cold and hungry. She had nothing to bring with her to the dormitory; she owns almost nothing. Boarders are required to have an adult sign an emergency contact sheet and agree to be the contact person concerning progress in school. When asked, Mookho knew no one who could be her contact person. She did not have one adult in her life who could respond if she got sick or needed help. Sr. Vitalina, the HL Orphan Lead for HL-sponsored children at the school, cried all night about Mookho’s situation. Leslie gathered what supplies we had on hand and sent the small package back with Sr. Juliet, asking that Mookho visit our office the next day.

When she arrived, she and Leslie discussed what had happened on her first day of school. She was so excited. She loved her classes and had already read a novel she heard they will study in English class. She beamed and repeatedly thanked us for helping her go to school. Leslie told her about Sr. Juliet’s visit. HL is now the emergency contact for Mookho—an organization instead of a person! Together they purchased the few items she needed (a mattress, wash bucket, socks, shoes, a blanket, toothpaste, toothbrush, pens and notebooks). Mookho was so appreciative and, with her mattress and supplies in tow, headed back to Pitseng on public transport to study for a quiz on Monday. Her sponsor, Dr. Naida Hyde from Nelson, B.C., arrives in a month to work with us for six weeks on the YAH project. That she will actually see this child and have the opportunity to hold her is a wonderful thing.

There is so much to be grateful for here.

## January 30 2007

*Please note that on Feb. 8 we go up to Thaba Tseka, high in the mountains, and I have no idea what email access I will have. I hope the hospital will let me use theirs when it works, but I cannot guarantee it. I ask*

*you to be patient if you are waiting for a reply. I return to Hlotse on March 3 for three days before going to Canada.*

Africa rises like an emerging force to meet the dawn. Sounds crescendo, people bustle, children sweep, chicken cluck. Most rise at 5:00 a.m. to prepare. Fetching water for a full body wash in small plastic tubs is mandatory. Lighting the fire, cleaning and tidying take time. One must be ready for transport, as travel by foot or taxi takes time.

This morning I go with the six girls sponsored by St. Bart's Church in Ottawa to see the new vocational school they attend in Maputsoe. Nthuseng, Marie O'Neill's girl, has joined the group. I have packed them each a simple lunch in the plastic boxes I bought for them – a piece of bread, an apple, a boiled egg. We must leave by 7:00 a.m. They are excited for me to meet Sr. Helen, the diminutive Irish nun they have grown to like so much in the first week. Each is bedecked in her new, grey, school uniform. Our taxi is the usual 15-seater with music so loud one's solar plexus vibrates. I can hardly stand it first thing in the morning. One adjusts. As we travel south for the half-hour ride, the mountains are in full regalia! The morning light is special as the sun bounds its way over the peaks to reveal the valleys and deliver its summer heat. *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* is, of course, one song I know, so the girls and I begin our shoulder dance and laugh. They love it when I dance or am silly. I love it too.

All along the shoulders of the road, we pass schoolchildren in various coloured school uniforms (maroon, grey, brown, black and navy). Some are in rags, others not. They walk, skip and meander on their way to school, knowing full well they must not be late. The taxi stops often to pick up children and take workers to the garment factory in Maputsoe. The music is so loud that when the sliding door opens, it blares onto the landscape. We can't stop dancing and neither can they. These dear little black bodies waiting at the side of the road instantly move to the rhythm, even the tiny preschoolers. Dancing is as breathing, and nature compels them to move. I can't stop laughing as they giggle when I notice them. Morning begins!

This little 100-student vocational school is perfect. It is the first place I have seen here where children have a dignified place to go to the bathroom. All is organized, spotless and ready for the students. It was founded decades ago by Irish nuns, and this sweet, wee one in front of me is the epitome of kindness and compassion. I feel my breathing deepen and relax as I know my girls are safe and will be cared for. I won't have to worry about them.

This school teaches industrial sewing, math, English, Sesotho, business, home management, and health and nutrition. If one cannot manage the regular system (I am incredulous that anyone can), there are few options. The hope for these seven girls is that they get a job in a factory or earn a little on their own – if they are able to save the huge amount of money necessary to buy or share a machine. The prospects are dismal for girls here, and I worry so much about what to do for them.

This small school is a blessing. The girls are treated with respect and love. Sr. Helen remarks that our girls are so lovely and different from all the others, and she asks how we accomplished this. I tell her we have taught them to trust. She still marvels that they are so open and do not display the pernicious fear that permeates the children of Lesotho. I like her very much and know we will be friends. We buy a lot of uniforms for our schools, so we discuss how to give her tiny school some business. They provide all the sewing materials free for the girls, because none can pay for more than the modest tuition. The school survives – but always on the line. I am sure we can help.

One hates to go out of the house, because as soon as I see a good leader such as Sr. Helen, I feel the need to help them support their community. HL grows daily, but we only have so many resources. In the beginning, we took no administrative money from donations; now we must take some. Our donors were thrilled. We need money for salaries. We are hiring a full-time office manager in Canada this month, because Carolyn and I cannot in our wildest imaginations manage this workload. It is not a favour to anyone if we burn out. I still do not get any salary for my work for HL, although I have a modest one from the CIDA project. We must have the people to administer the programs, to go to these schools and villages, the money for transport, to mail the letters, report to donors, and buy supplies and a new printer.

These last few days, I am again struggling with this. Donors like that my work for HL is all volunteer, that we take so little for admin and accomplish so much. Konesoang needs a filing cabinet; we need a truck; we must keep these good people and pay them a decent salary. Even the modest amount that the Board directs us to budget for admin barely pays for Carolyn's salary and her trips to Lesotho to manage the projects. It does not cover our Basotho staff, or their admin. We are submitting proposals constantly to secure staff funding and admin support, but it is a long process with variable success.

I understand this is the trajectory of every charity, but it is a real struggle for me personally as well as professionally. I am the same as the donors: I want all the money to go to the children, yet I have the weight of raising the money for salaries, etc., on my shoulders. I spend so much of my time selecting and training staff. I love them and am proud of our team (see the About Us page of the website). I want to treat them fairly and give them the supplies they need to do the job that they want to do and our donors expect. In a year, I will need a salary too. I host the HL office in my home to save money. I optimistically thought that if we posted these needs frankly on the Web, some business-oriented people would see the rationale and donate specifically to these funds. A few have, but it barely scratches the surface.

I am writing frankly to you about this, for the first time since HL began, because I am so concerned about it. None of us wants to talk about admin funds. If you can advise me, please do. As I write, I again contemplate how to plan for the future for this organization. We have really wonderful things in store, and we must have the faith that all will come into place. I am so touched that, to date, four people have written HL into their wills. Maybe if we get enough donations for an endowment fund, we can meet the admin needs in that way and save all the rest for the children. Who knows!

Last night, my supper was once again interrupted by a procession of nuns requesting help. One was Sr. Thandeka. She is part of the HL Baithaopi ba Lerato group of young Anglican nuns who have been trained during the year to look after families living with HIV/AIDS. Sr. Thandeka has two families. She is deeply concerned just now with one. There are six family members. Three have been tested for HIV. Of those three, all are positive, and all have TB. I gave her the money to take the other three for testing immediately. The one girl, 15, who is not sick, is bright and bound to the domestic needs of the sick ones. The mother moves around the hut by holding on to the walls. Each is on ARVs now and may improve. The 18-year-old is so ill with AIDS that she cannot raise her hand to her mouth with water. Her CD4 count is 21 – close to death. She begs me for sponsorship for the 15-year-old. The mother is beside herself thinking that when she dies, this child must look after the whole family. How can she, if she has only Grade 7? They live far from a road, and the logistics of this are not easy either. The child falls outside our twinned school network. We should not sponsor her. I will work on this today. So many are dying! How can we not help this child to have some kind of a future?

Penney Place has returned to live in Pitseng, happy as a lark. How she loves her life there. Tlalane, Nick and Surita are safely in Thaba Tseka after having to return the first time because the bus broke down. Adrian Gregorich left for a school term in Durban and returns in July to volunteer. His life has been changed through our Leadership Camp, and he bursts with new insight and determination. Bruce Burbidge is working on the Thakaneng Youth Leadership Centres and living at the office. We have made application for land in both Pitseng and Hlotse. I will have to become best friends with the Anglican Bishop, as I think both pieces of land are theirs. Getting clear title to land is not easy, and I am focused on this.

Rockcliffe Park Public School in Ottawa has started a new birthday initiative. Parents, especially Diana Carney, have put a lot of effort into using our website to allow children to invite a few friends in each invitation list to donate to their twinned school instead of bringing a gift to the birthday party. They have designed the invitations and donor cards the child can bring. There are photos posted on our site. It is so encouraging that these young elementary school kids will forfeit a few presents so that other children can benefit. Their parents must be so proud of them.

I go next week to Thaba Tseka in central Lesotho to train another group of young leaders in their twenties. They have been selected and are so excited about this opportunity. This is Phase 2 of the Building Governance Capacity and Community Engagement: Youth Against HIV/AIDS partnership with the Institute on Governance, funded by CIDA. Watching how this has changed so many lives convinces me that this is a worthy use of taxpayers' money. These kids are making a big difference in their communities.

## February 5 2007

Yesterday was my middle son, Lucas', birthday. I managed to call home for a few minutes. I have no idea how he got to be 28. These years have flown, and he is a fine, hard-working young man with a challenging career and a wonderful woman, Adrienne, in his life. There is much to be grateful for.

We see much change here. The national elections are on February 17. Change is in the air, but who knows? They have had six elections since gaining independence from Britain (as a protectorate) in 1966. The ruling party here – Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) – now has the first serious contender since its political monopoly since 1998, under Ntate Mosisili. There are 19 parties registered for this election, which will bring many more into the political engagement arena. The most serious contender is the All Basotho Convention (ABC) under Ntate Thabane, a former Cabinet Minister who started this party in October with 17 parliamentarians who walked across the floor to join him. The recent census in March 2006 brings 16,720 more voters to bear on the process. It does not seem like much, but taking a census here is a monumental feat. Many more did not make it onto the voters' list.

The striving for democracy is a delicate, step-wise process. This is the first time the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) *Principles and Guidelines Governing Elections*, adopted in 2004, will be used to ensure a fair and transparent election. Lesotho is now the chair of SADC, and if its Prime Minister changes, so will the chairperson. For the first time, the country will use the dual election system under which 40 new parliamentary seats will go to the party gaining the largest number of elected candidates, on a proportional representation system. There is excitement in the air and rallies everywhere. The only problem I foresee is if the results are contested because of a lack of faith in the voting process or the vote-counting procedures.

Laura Edgar is here for a month for a mid-term evaluation in our CIDA funded project. She will meet with our trained youth corp. this week in the villages. The youth are excited to tell their stories and show how they have changed. We have the Annual Steering Committee Meeting in Maseru tomorrow and will spend the rest of the day at the orphanage. We have had to rent a car this three days to get everything done before I go “up” – lot of travel and some really tough roads. Today our time is in Hlotse and Pitseng; tomorrow, Maseru and Sekamaneng; Wednesday, Bokoro and Seboche.

Carolyn is working hard on our restructuring of the twinning and school involvement. We have had many meetings on this and have arrived at a system we think will be more helpful to the schools here and easier for everyone to participate in. Having us both on the ground here at the same time allows us a full program review. We are always trying so hard to work more effectively to help more children. The 7,000 under our school network now will gain more. By building stronger school communities, they can help their neighbours. The degree of need is haunting and drives us on, day after day, to reach more with the few staff we have. All is good. Every day we do so much more than would be done if we were not here.

In the last year alone, treatment for AIDS has come to some of our villages. Only when people see with their own eyes can they believe this killer can be stopped. We do see progress: young people believing they have a future, children going to school who would otherwise be sitting at home, principals testing to know their status. None of this would have been possible a year ago. We must concentrate on the positives and bear down on the remaining barriers. There is much work to be done.

## February 17 2007

*This letter is long and I ask you to forgive me for it, but I want to articulate our vision for HL for the next five years. It is so exciting and has such potential to help so many that I want to share it with you so that you too may feel the hope and promise of all that we can do for the struggling people of our villages.*

*Today, Feb. 17, is election day in Lesotho. It is our prayer and hope that the people will choose wisely to vote for a group of strong leaders to move Lesotho forward. It is our hope, as well, that the parties will accept the “will of the people” and bring about a peaceful transition of power.*

February 8: The journey into the mountains started early. We have taken two young men with us to train with the Thaba Tseka group. One was so excited that he came at 5:00 a.m. instead of 6:15 a.m.! Luckily, I was up and working. Dear boy!

We left Hlotse at 6:00 a.m. and arrived in Thaba Tseka at 3:30 p.m. The road up was predictably magnificent scenery, but the public bus was painful. Seats became dislodged, rain pelted in the windows, and the condition of the road made it strikingly similar to a pummeling. The one bathroom stop is at the village of Mansumyane, on the top of a mountain. Although I am entirely used to being the only white person within miles, this seemed to be the first time a few had seen a *lahoa* (foreigner). One gives about 3 cents Canadian and receives a generous, carefully folded portion of toilet paper and joins the cue for the outhouse (which is a pit latrine). It was a long trip, but we made it safely.

Surita and Nick are staying near the hospital with Dan. It was nice to see them. They love their time here, getting to know this incredibly beautiful, HIV/AIDS- and poverty-stricken village. Its remoteness makes everything so difficult. With funds from the African Development Fund, the government has actually

started grading the road from both ends and eventually will tar it. I may be dead by the time it finishes, but at least it is getting some attention.

Tlalané and I are ensconced in a house belonging to the Catholic priests at the mission with three bedrooms overlooking the mountains. Renting this out helps them survive. The bed is comfortable. There is no hot water or sink, but there is an often-functioning indoor toilet. The power went out in the evening, but it is working now.

I write this note at 6:00 a.m. For the past hour, there has been a constant procession of men in here. At 5:00 it started with a couple of the priests using the toilet. Then we have had boys in to provide hot water for our washtubs. Just now another man has come. We cannot lock the outer door, only our own rooms. Busy place! I wish someone had told me.

This morning we meet the local dignitaries, many of whom are invited to the training to share their perspective. I will drop in to Paray Primary, a stone's throw from where we are living, to deliver some sponsor letters, and to the hospital to finalize the transport of the anaesthesia machine Dr. Brian Morton has sent here for surgery. Everything is a lot of work. The walk between places is considerable and greatly reduces the amount one can expect to do in a day. I look forward to the exercise.

This place has a haunting beauty. The mountains fold around us on all sides, with constantly changing hues. The air is clear and thin. We are very high up now and may be tired for a day or two to adjust. We marvel at how long it takes to boil water at this altitude. I will spend over a month here between now and mid-April. I am excited to be here. I will learn so much, get to know the youth here well, and breathe in the wisdom and grace of these mountains. We already have so many friends here and will make many more. Bohang will come up in a week. Carolyn, Bruce and Konesoang will come for a week to look after things at the schools and projects. It will be a busy place. Laura Edgar is working with government and civil society capacity building in Hlotse and Botha-Bothe for the next two weeks and then will come up for the third week of youth training. Bruce continues his work on the Thakaneng for Pitseng. He has another meeting on the Turnbull Hall for Sefapanong Sunday. Lots going on!

To digress, the day before coming "up," we went to Bokoro High and Primary Schools and St. Charles High School. It was wonderful to see the children. I spent time by myself with the children at Bokoro Primary, always my favourite thing. When I came the first time, I am sure many had not seen a white person up close. They were fascinated and frightened. They are such sweet children. It was a joy to have time just to chat with them.

We have chosen Bokoro and St. Charles High Schools for the Granny's Child Program, currently funded by the Kingston Grandmother Connection (KGC). This will allow orphans who are living with and being cared for by their grandmothers to stay in school. Taking this burden for the present and providing hope for the future is going to significantly change and bless the lives of these grandmothers and their charges. Both principals were stunned to have this sponsorship for these destitute children. Keeping these orphans in school is the very best thing we can ever do for the grandmothers.

These two schools are in the remote northern part of Lesotho where there is little help to survive. Both schools provide a good atmosphere for the kids and some way to move forward in life. At this point, the Granny's Child Program will fund 25–50 orphans, maybe more, depending on the specific needs. By this I mean that the three-person committee in each school is authorized to give according to need. One orphan may need books to stay in school, another fees and/or books or exam fees. We are all so excited

about this program and the generosity of the KGC to fund it. (As I write, another priest has “popped by” to use the toilet—I need to get my head around this for a minute.)

Gwen Ruston arrives in a few days to work at Bokoro schools for five months. We are calling her Princess Gwen as ‘M’e Mapalesa has gone to such efforts to make her Basotho hut comfortable. She will love it there (another man—Grand Central Station!). I can see privacy will be the morning issue, especially as I rise so early to work in my pyjamas!

February 15: Our youth training is going well. Our group of 20 is astonished to learn so much and is resolved to grow and become good leaders. Tlalane is dedicated to them and a wonderful leader herself.

February 17: This time in Thaba Tseka has given me a much-needed rest, both in sleeping longer and in communing with nature. I am beginning to feel refreshed, and my mind is percolating with ideas. I did not realize how tired I had been. The 30–40 minute walk everywhere is giving me time for reflection and marvel at what a beautiful world it is. Time with the children at the schools here is energizing and brings me great hope that our programs are making a huge difference.

Paray Primary and Sefapanong are under new leadership. Both new principals are wonderful women, determined to make their schools fine places to learn, regardless of the constraints. I had time to get to know them at the Leadership Camps and like them both very much. At Paray Primary, ‘M’e Mebeleng is a quiet woman, respected by her teachers. Her natural introversion gives her the opportunity to engage her teachers in decision-making. One of our children, Itumeleng, sponsored by my sister, Anne Richards, has been following me around when possible. We sneak glances at each other and smile. Her English has improved so much. She lives with her grandmother and is visibly growing in confidence, knowing someone cares for her. I see her more relaxed and happy. What a dear child!

At Sefapanong, we discussed the new hall with the staff. Under their new principal, they continue the team ownership of the project and are so excited about the Turnbull Hall that they can hardly contain themselves. We are finalizing all the details so that they may start construction.

This morning, I woke at 5:00 a.m. with great joy at the prospect of our two new centres: the Youth Centre (Thakaneng) in Pitseng and the new Leadership and Governance Centre in Hlotse. The Hlotse Centre will be larger—hopefully with our own office. The centres will be multi-purposed. We will finally have a place to offer support to our various populations.

Here is what we have planned:

- At **Pitseng**, the Thakaneng Youth Centre, soon to be built with funds raised by the Ottawa branch of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA), will eventually be led by youth for programming, leadership development etc.
- At **Hlotse**, the Leadership and Governance Centre, built with funds raised by Alan Garrett and the Lakeside Church in Guelph, will be larger and will have more facilities to address various needs. The centre will contain a separate **Girls’ Hostel** for young orphaned and vulnerable girls so that there is a safe place for them to live (currently impossible and a huge worry). Jennifer Parr, on the HL Board of Directors, has accepted the challenge of raising the money with various groups and individuals. We plan to have 5–10 carefully selected girls, chosen from Standard 7 to Form D (12–18-year-olds) from each of our villages on the basis of English proficiency, school performance, leadership and initiative. They will be individually sponsored, given extra help with school subjects, and volunteer to do peer tutoring with orphans after school in the centre. During

the school terms, they will be trained in village youth program delivery. This work will be volunteer, as part of their contribution for the opportunities afforded them. During each holiday (two months of summer, six weeks of winter break and an Easter break of ten days), they will return to their villages to run programs for orphans and vulnerable children. When they return to the hostel, they will collaborate on successes and challenges. Girls will be with the program for five years, with older ones mentoring younger ones. This will allow a constant corps of young women to model gender equity and youth development in their villages.

- The **programs** at the centres will be aimed at grandmothers, orphans, in-school and out-of-school youth and local partners. We plan to have
  - A Grandmothers' Day each month offering a meal, mutual support and support on how to help their orphans. Eventually, we hope to have some income-generating options for them;
  - After-school peer tutoring for in-school children in English, Math and Science—the three obstacles to progress in school and the main reason so many fail;
  - A library so that people can have books on various subjects for informal learning and the development of general knowledge through literacy programs, supplies and opportunities;
  - Eventually a computer school to allow youth to benefit from the advantages afforded most of us in Canada;
  - Day programs for out-of-school youth in leadership, HIV/AIDS, health education, gender equity training, life-skills, teenage parenting, career guidance, governance and community development projects;
  - Income-generating opportunities (we are struggling with this but have some ideas and irons in the fire);
  - A Youth Educational Tours Program, using the hostel for accommodation during vacations. Youth from other countries and our involved schools in Canada (gender divided) will come to Lesotho for youth-led trips to see the country and its villages. Visiting youth will help with local projects, hike in the mountains and experience the culture (Basotho dancing and Sesotho lessons, meet the local chiefs, etc). This will change the lives of all involved while providing Basotho youth with opportunities for leadership, program delivery and income. Currently, when Canadian high school students ask if they can come, we must refuse as there has been nowhere to house them. Now that we will have the hostel and these exceptional youth leaders, it will be a wonderful cultural experience for both groups. Visiting youth will live as the Basotho do. The Canadian youth attending these three- to four-week programs will commit to returning home to raise \$3,000 each for the centre for its sustainability for the orphan programs;
  - Capacity building programs for partnership development, governance application, financial accountability, networking and collaborative community development projects. These will include local government personnel, elected officials, civil society groups, local entrepreneurs and partners (Lesotho Olympic Committee, Commonwealth Games Committee, Red Cross, Blue Cross, Sesotho Media, World Food Program, HIV/AIDS counselling and testing groups, PLWHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS), and faith-based partners, etc.); and
  - Teacher professional development sessions on discipline, teaching methods, reporting procedures, child development, etc.

I understand that this all sounds frightfully ambitious, but the pieces are indeed falling into place. It will take the next two to three years to put it all together, but the needs are clear. In April, when I return to

Lesotho, we will have a brainstorming session with youth, our government and civil society partners to move this forward. It is essential that the community be involved in the planning process. Youth will be involved in all these planning and implementing facets and will develop our HL Youth Corp Leaders, who will, as their capacity grows, eventually take over portions and programs.

When I realize how many people in Canada and other countries are committed to helping us develop and implement these ideas, one can only be filled with gratitude and hope. For example, on my way back to Lesotho in early April, I will stop in England to involve a company called Totemic, based in Grantham, which has pledged their financial support and the involvement of their employees. A 'Pearls for Girls' initiative in Canada and the US is selling beautiful pearl jewellery made by girls for the Girls' Hostel initiative. People around the world want to help and are coming forward to walk with us in this vision. We can make an enormous difference and there is every reason to believe that it will happen.

It is my dream that these centres will become models for not only Lesotho but perhaps for other countries. Our staff and Board of Directors are fully committed to move mountains so that these grandmothers, local partners, teachers, orphans and vulnerable children can have a chance for hope and a future. Our HL motto is creating a future with those who are left! With our child sponsorship and other programs, this is how we will do it.

Hundreds of Basotho are praying for these initiatives and have gained new strength and resolve to practice strong leadership and good governance. We can do it! You who are reading this letter are part of our team and on behalf of all here in Lesotho we thank you—more than words can express—for your faith in us and the future of these children! God bless you!

## April 7 2007

As I flew into Maseru, looking down on the mountains, I could see the dramatic change in the landscape in the three weeks since I had returned to Canada. The onset of fall and the devastation of drought have changed the variegated greens to a tapestry of brown, gold, wheat and beige. There has been almost no rain since the promising showers of the spring. Parched crops sit in the fields. Another blow!

When I left Lesotho a few weeks ago I was overwhelmed with the number of deaths, the poverty in Thaba Tseka and the number of young ones struggling on their own to overcome the loss of their parents. I arrived to the news of more deaths and funerals. How do these people get up in the morning?

I had come from two days in England, meeting our new corporate partner, Totemic, in Grantham. My contact there, Paul Merritt, spared no effort in my welcome and comfort. Paul, the owner Phillip Rann, and his wife, Leslie, and their employees were gracious, enthusiastic and kind. They pledged monthly financial support and employee engagement.

Over the coming year, they will train, to our specification, numerous employees and give them paid leave to come to Lesotho for a month each to support our financial and partner capacity building with continuity measures built into the activities. This will give Konesoang knowledgeable help and greatly further our financial accountability goals. I like them all and feel I have made new friends there. The employees will begin to engage this community of 45,000 in helping our work with the AIDS orphans and vulnerable children. It is exciting!

In addition to this, Phillip has offered the funds to buy us a good used truck! Our struggle to provide services to 13 schools and thousands of children in ten mostly remote communities has been difficult and incredibly inefficient on public transport. On the way from the airport, I met with the Toyota dealership in Maseru and began our quest to get the best deal and the safest transport we can. After struggling for funds for a truck for 18 months, we are all overwhelmed with appreciation.

Before going up to Hlotse, I also met with the Catholic Archbishop, whom I like very much, to secure a letter to engage more Catholic communities in Ottawa. As well, I had excellent meetings with the Catholic Bishop of Leribe in St. Monica and the Anglican priest in Hlotse about the land in Pitseng for our centre. Long day!

On the way to the airport as I was leaving Lesotho in mid-March, I met with the Anglican Bishop of Lesotho, Ntate Mokuku, to solicit his approval for the donation from the Anglican Church of two pieces of land for the centre in Pitseng and the larger one in Hlotse. I left our 90-minute meeting feeling I had met and made friends with a truly holy man. He was wonderful and assured me that we could proceed on the challenging task of obtaining these two pieces, given that we could find the right piece in Hlotse owned by the church. Our research indicated that the likelihood of obtaining land from the government was nil and that we were reliant upon a private donation for clear title. I felt blessed to have met this fine man and look forward to another visit with him tonight when he comes to conduct an Easter Saturday evening service here. It is exciting to know that we are moving forward so well on the acquisition of land. I had feared it might be impossible, given the confusion in the local government, which controls land issues.

As I flew across the Atlantic this week, Bruce Burbidge, Penney Place and Carolyn Kennedy were returning to Canada after their months in Lesotho. Bruce has been working on the specs and finances of the centres and the Turnbull Hall we are building at Sefapanong. He has done a terrific job and will return in September to supervise the Pitseng Centre construction with Shelagh M'Gonigle. Penney worked in the schools in Pitseng, supported our orphan program and was generally a huge help. Her daughter Stacey and her partner Dean came to do a highly acclaimed circus show with the children in Pitseng, and as a team they painted walls and built benches for a terribly poor and remote school in Bokoko. Carolyn worked like a Trojan with Bohang Mats'umunyane, our Orphan Counsellor, funded by the Stephen Lewis Foundation. HL's Child Sponsorship, Orphan Relief Fund, Achievers' Fund and Granny's Child Fund programs have grown significantly, and there is much administration and financial accountability work to keep up. Carolyn is loved dearly by all our staff, children and Project Leaders and I know will be missed enormously.

On my arrival in Hlotse, it was wonderful to have a reunion with Dr. Naida Hyde, a psychologist from BC, at the end of her six weeks working on the YAH project. Naida has become a dear friend. Her gifts of listening, guidance and psychological insight have been so appreciated by the local partners, children and staff. She and her partner, Dr. Helga Jacobson, also sponsor three young girls, and their generosity is remarkable.

I hope to see Gwen Ruston, a high school teacher from Ottawa, volunteering at Bokoro Primary and Bokoro High School. I brought letters and treats from her parents and look forward to catching up. The community of Bokoro has welcomed her with open arms, and I know that she will be changed from her five months there.

I leave at 6:00 a.m. Monday on public transit to travel the long and sometimes painful way to Thaba Tseka to complete the YAH training with the youth. Surita Parashar and Nick Barber have been walking

with these young people for two months now, and I look forward to seeing them. I return in a week to stay at the Bytown Orphanage, supported by the Quinte Chapter of HL, and visit with Sr. Margaret and the children. The Quinte group built a lovely and comfortable Basotho hut there for volunteers and HL staff. They are now adding funds to those raised by Suzanne Veit and Maureen Nicholls to build rental units on the orphanage property to provide the orphanage with some monthly income.

I conclude this letter with a story from Thaba Tseka. Sr. Marie Annunciata, director of a small but quite wonderful nursing school there, came to me to plea for a child-headed household. I know her well, and she would not come to me unless the situation was desperate. I asked Konesoang Mohatla, the HL Coordinator, to investigate, and after hearing of her visit to their hut, I asked her to write their story. This family broke our hearts and was helped through the Granny's Child Fund with money donated by the Kingston Grandmother Connection.



**Konesoang's story of the Napi Family:** Our site visit to Thaba Tseka in February involved a visit with 23-year-old Joseph Mosekamane, who is the head of his household and a nursing student. He could neither eat the food provided nor study, knowing his siblings were starving and without support in a nearby hut.

Joseph has two brothers and one sister. In 2000 and 2003, the children lost their beloved father and mother. After the loss of their parents, their inheritance of donkeys, 7 cows and 23 goats were stolen. Their more than 200 sheep were all killed by the heavy

snowfall. When I interviewed the children in their rented, one-room hut, they were subsisting entirely on *papa* (maize meal porridge). They were totally dependent on their 70-year-old grandmother, who lives in another village and must walk for one full day to see her grandchildren.

The children welcomed me with broad smiles. The youngest, Tseko, was busy doing his school work with his friend. There was no table and only one chair, which they insisted I sit on. The children knelt around me. This photo shows Tseko busy doing his school assignment.



The children seemed to be so responsible and independent. Sister Tlhlohelo, 15, was cooking *papa* for their breakfast. *Papa* had been their only food for the past four days, with no hope of getting more. Their poverty had failed to remove the beautiful smiles on their faces and their gratitude at my visit. I later heard that their mother had been a lovely and happy soul by nature.

In 2006, Napi's family received maize meal donations from World Food Organization, but no more. Buta (the second born) left school due to this devastating situation to look for a job but had had no luck yet.

Their grandmother is old and not working. She loves them, and she has all good intentions about them. Just after I sat down, she arrived to see how they were doing. It was after sunset. She had left her house before sunrise to walk in the rain, carrying her clothes and a small bag of peaches she hoped to sell. Although the peaches were meant for selling, the children couldn't hold themselves when their grandmother arrived. They asked to eat some. Although the grandmother insisted I take some of her peaches, I eventually convinced her to let me buy them for M10.00 (CAD \$1.60), her total business for the day.

Tlholohelo, at 15, tries to sell small biscuits for ten cents each (equivalent to two cents Canadian) to generate some income. It is not going well, because she has been prohibited from selling on the school premises, a school she would dearly love to attend.

Phakiso, 18, is a talented boy at playing the keyboard. The tiny piano, wardrobe, base bed and the kitchen unit belong to an aunt who ignores the responsibility of paying rental fees so the children can have this meagre furniture. They owe seven months' rental fees but found the landlord to be very kind to them as he had not expelled them.



Everybody was happy and welcoming in the family regardless of their prevailing situation. At night they used the paraffin lamp that should be covered with a glass, but the glass had broken long ago and they could not replace it (it cost less than M5.00, 8 cents Canadian). In this case, the lamp becomes dim and smoky.

Because of the Granny's Child Fund, we are able to help this family. School fees and books can be paid. Phakiso received shoes to replace his tattered old ones. HL arranged groceries for them M500.00 (equivalent to CAD \$83) on a monthly basis. We paid their hut rental fees for a year.

I do not know how to tell you what a difference this has made to these children and their tired, old grandmother. In Sesotho, on their behalf, *rea leboha haholo*—thank you so much!

## April 20 2007



Thaba Tseka is incredibly beautiful. The nights are getting colder, the days shorter, as winter approaches. I think of those in their huts throughout the mountains with no insulation and dirt floors. When one looks out on the landscape after nightfall, there are a few candles burning in the huts, but most are in total darkness. I think of all the children who do not have the candlelight to do their homework. As I leave, I will not miss the bucket baths but have appreciated being in a place with no mirrors or preoccupation with appearance. There is something special here, perhaps because of its isolation.

Our final week of training with the young people, when we've seen them growing so much in understanding and confidence, is a privilege. They are touchingly appreciative of the opportunity to learn in a loving and supportive atmosphere. The youth will start placements in local government offices, schools and organisations to gain pre-employment experience while learning about their community. They have conducted 42 interviews with local leaders and have learned that, like all groups of people, some do valuable work and others do not. They can now evaluate how power is used in a group, how decisions are made and who has a voice in these decisions. It has been enlightening and empowering for them. *(This photo shows Tlalane, Laura from IOG and me with the youth.)*

On the last day of this nine-week journey together, it brought tears to my eyes to hear each in turn describe how much s/he had been transformed; how previously she had given up, lost hope, lost confidence and now is resolved to become a community leader armed with new understanding of governance, gender equity, HIV/AIDS, communication, leadership and experience. The youth's five weeks in the field, interviewing community and government leaders, showed them that they indeed could rise up and speak up.

Tlalane has been working hard to support these young people and is loved by them. Surita and Nick have been a blessing to the youth and a terrific help to us. They both have a good heart, strong skills and a willing spirit. Naomi Dore from Kingston comes at the beginning of May to help Tlalane with the YAH groups in various locations and to prepare for the centres.

A reporter here has done three Lesotho radio sessions on what we are doing and is going to do another one. He told me that when the first 'Know Your Status' campaign came to Thaba Tseka two weeks ago, government personnel were encouraged to test for HIV/AIDS. Of those who tested, more than 60% were positive!!! One can only gasp!

The three doctors at the Paray Mission Hospital (a Swiss, a Zimbabwean anaesthesiologist and a Nigerian physician) all said what a help Dan Kelly was, a fourth-year medical student placed here by HL for three months. Dan worked so hard, on call for many days at a time. The doctors are appreciative of the anaesthetic machine organized and sent by HL previous volunteer cardiologist Dr. Brian Morton. They speak fondly of him and his wife, Joanne, from their time here last year.

The doctors sadly informed me that the significant rise in malnutrition among orphans is going to become one of the most serious health problems here. How will these children manage on their own, especially as the numbers increase over these next few years? The World Health Organization is sending out concerns about a virulent strain of TB that is drug resistant and highly communicable. Lesotho is projected to be extremely hard hit by this, as so many people's immune systems have been decimated by HIV and AIDS.

Leaving Thaba Tseka is always touching. This community is, in many ways, as traditional as one will find. People survive, often on the thought that someday they may be able to leave. As we drive down the mountains, children are working on a Saturday, carrying large bundles of scrub for the fire, supplies such as water and paraffin on their heads and herding animals. They make their contribution. One group of three tiny boys in their dirty blankets was herding a dozen sheep in a place so remote I could not see another sign of life. They looked about seven. Their clothes were torn and the blankets thin. I think of how my own three sons grew up.

One of the Baithaopi ba Lerato groups (young Anglican nuns looking after families living with AIDS) has taken on a new family. It is a grandmother-headed household with a 15-year-old in a wheelchair who can neither walk nor talk. She and a sick sibling are sleeping on mattresses made of old clothes stuffed into maize bags. Sr. Malifu will get them mattresses to keep away the cold, especially the sick ones. About 90% of the members of the families who had been tested were positive. One has died recently.

One day, as 'M'e Mahlompho brought the mail, I noticed my mother's familiar handwriting on an envelope for her orphan, Lerato. I know how much these letters mean to the children.

On Sunday, Konesoang and I spoke at the Anglican service in both Hlotse and then in Pitseng to inform the communities about the centres we are building and the need for community support (and of course to make a pitch for donated church land). The three leaders in Hlotse are, thankfully, very supportive. At the end of the service, when the amount of the collection was announced in St. Saviour's Parish (the largest in the district), the collection was M81.65 (\$13.17 CAD).

The church community in Pitseng seems excited about being chosen to have a Youth Centre in its community. This is a terribly poor and neglected parish. We have proposed a 50-year lease at no cost so that this land will not leave them forever. It is not done until it is signed though, and that will take a couple of months to go through all the channels. But the bishop is onside, so I think it will work out. Such a relief!

Getting land donated is a real challenge, and we have worked very hard to make this happen. I told the church that I would find an Anglican church in Canada to twin with them—to provide prayer and correspondence support and perhaps a bit of fundraising. I am getting more information about the parish, but it is desperately poor and suffers from a lack of strong leadership. It has no priest and must rely on priests coming from other parishes from time to time. The congregation is primarily mothers, grandmothers and orphans. The building is falling apart, and they were thrilled at the thought of some support. We still have no ideas about land in Hlotse but soldier on in expectation of success. We still have time on this one, and Tlalané will follow up.

As I picked up the St. Mary's girls' letters last night and had a visit, it is easy to see they are doing better. The changes we have made have been very positive for them. There is an observable difference in the girls who attend the sewing school. They are happy for the first time and are achieving success. Their marks are good, and they are proud to tell me of their achievements. There is also a noticeable improvement in their English. They study more and are much less a clique. They love their mentors and want reports on each and on the volunteers who have helped them.



Our newest and 13th twinned school is Deep Cove School, BC. Deep Cove is already a really committed new partner and I know will be a real blessing to the children of Motati Primary. Two teachers were invited to last week's training on HIV/AIDS and orphan support led by Bohang. They were thrilled to be included and said they learned so much. The school has two, long, school class buildings and two tin classrooms. Half of the roof on one of the long buildings is completely gone. The children sit on planks or jagged rocks to learn. As soon as the weather turns to rain or snow, the children are sent home. How do they manage in the freezing cold? We are raising money to repair the roof and get them seats.

Last week, two of the teachers came to the office to get blankets provided by an orphan sponsor, Linda Downey. They were jubilant for the children to have these warm jerseys and blankets (given to the smallest children). We have purchased track suits for many who had no clothes to speak of. The staff is committed to the children and grateful to receive coloured pencils and pens for the teachers. They are so proud to be an HL school and are working hard to fulfill their obligations.

I return to Canada now and will not come back before August, maybe October. As winter approaches here and I arrive home in the flush of spring, I realize I am seasonally challenged. I am sorry to leave—there is so much going on, and the need is so great. I am happy to be going home after five months of the past six months in Lesotho, to see my children, family and friends. There is much work to do there as well. I have a meeting with Totemic in Heathrow on the way home and look forward to moving this forward.

I spent some time in a tearful meeting with a young girl who had been raped at gunpoint. There is no recourse. These young women are so vulnerable to such advances as they are already afraid of life. It is so wrong.

I have spent a long time researching our options to buy a truck. Toyota Maseru will give us a charity discount, warranty and service package on a new, basic, double cab pickup. It seems the best option with our all-female staff. It takes close to two months to order, so I will follow through. We are all excited to have this new option to travel and deliver our orphan and school supplies. It has been a long time on public transit.

King Letsie III and Queen Masenate have just had a son! (There has been rain, but it is too little too late to save the crops. Some people think the recent rain is in celebration of this momentous event.) Gender inequity reigns full tilt. The king's two daughters have now been demoted, and everyone is happy.

On this last morning in Hlotse, as I finish this letter, I have treated myself to the heater in this early morning.

For those who read all these long letters, thank you for your interest. For those who support us, I need to say that every day here, I know your money is well spent and that children, schools, grandmothers, youth and many others benefit from your generosity. We all thank you.

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## November 6 2007

After a six-month absence from Lesotho, it is not difficult to see the effects of the past nine-month drought. The now predictable October storms have come to water the soil, erode the soil, nourish the land and bring spring to this incredible, beautiful country. The storms are so fierce and sudden that one holds a certain preparedness lest one is caught unaware. As the land greens itself and the flowers burst forth, there is a perennially renewed sense of hope and a lifting of the spirit.

On the way in from the airport, I visited Bytown Orphanage briefly to see the children, Sr. Margaret, and HL volunteers Phil Clarke and Maeve Hancey. The latter are doing a great job and are loved by the staff

and children. They are teaching the children to use the donated computers. One girl told me it was one of the best things of her life.

I was at Motati Primary this week to take photos of the three large gardens the wee children planted with seeds HL gave them from funds from Deep Cove School, BC. Not only had the storms washed away all the seeds but the soil as well. This team of teachers are inspirational in all they do with nothing, and I felt so sad to see their discouragement. We will replace the seeds for them, but the amount of labour required to replant was daunting for them to consider. They are a wonderful school (on the 2008 calendar, January, with no roof).

Hlotse, the small town where we have our office, has also had a facelift. There is a street name with a proper sign (Linare Crescent) on one of the two main streets (definitely not a crescent) and tarred roads on three streets. There is even a sidewalk on one side of the street most of the way to our office. These changes are not insignificant as one no longer has to wade through torrents of water or the mud or dodge cars that themselves are dodging potholes. The transformation is amazing, and we are all so appreciative. Last year the Shoprite grocery store, now tarred roads! What next!

Our office has changes too. Totemic, a privately owned company (PayPlan) in the UK, donated most of the funds for our new truck, a Toyota Hilux, four-wheel drive, double cab with enclosed back. I never thought I would be so excited about a truck. It has taken us three years of real effort, but it is now here. It is just wonderful, and of course we cannot believe we have been managing for three years with all our sites and responsibilities on public transport. It is a pleasure to drive, is great off-road and is making our lives so much easier. I think of Totemic each time I get in the truck and wish they could see how much of a difference it is making. The company's Jonathan Green brought us a very small HP printer, which has revolutionized our admin. It works all the time, is fast and easy. Bless their hearts. I know Paul Merritt got it for us and want to thank him.

At the end of my first week, we hosted another of our **Step Up and Speak Out Young Women's Conferences**. Donna Bawden, Naomi Dore, and Sonya Kalyniak worked so hard planning the three days to effectively reach 30 young women, aged 15–22, from our various mountain villages. It is a transformative experience, and they did a terrific job. The focus on sexual health, sexual violence, self-protection, HIV/AIDS, gender equity, and communication is the first many of these young women have heard that girls are a blessing and not second-class citizens. They love every minute of the experience and so do we. I was thrilled to see so many I know well and hear how they are dealing with their challenges. Lots of hugs!

I am so proud of our team. They are a wonderful group of women. Konesoang Mohatla and Donna Bawden have been shepherding the organization in painfully cramped quarters with inadequate resources. There are six–eight people working in one room with people coming and going at a shocking rate, one phone line for telephone and Internet, and barely a spot of room to keep our work. I am determined to build an office this coming year as there is no space in town to rent and we cannot continue to manage our productivity under these conditions. I cannot in all conscience expect people to reach expectations with this constant chaos. Everyone who has come and observed our work environment is incredulous.

There have been many difficult times in the past couple of months, and our team has risen to each in a caring, professional, and effective manner. Living here is not easy. There is a price to being exposed to

such suffering day after day. Because of what we do, the people we engage with are those in desperate need. We listen to their stories, struggle to find ways to help, suffer when we cannot help them.

For Canadians, the gender inequity is one of the most raw and painful. Young women are so vulnerable, the most orphaned with no one to protect them. We are all wounded by this and feel helpless. Our focus on gender equity is sound, but the systemic change that is required will take patient, Herculean efforts. It is the issue that bothers me the most in the night when my soul cannot find rest from all I am exposed to.

We are quickly closing in on the arrangements for the Thakaneng Youth Centre in Pitseng. I had an excellent afternoon and site visit with the Anglican Administration Manager to finalize the donation of the land. He is my new best friend. Bruce Burbidge has returned to Lesotho and has been busy interviewing potential contractors. One has been chosen. The Ottawa Branch of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) is raising the funds. The youth we have been training for two years are working hard to prepare for the centre. The community is excited. Deirdre Ellis, an Ottawa architect, has finished the plans, and everyone is ready to go. A group of young women and men from the village will be given training throughout on the processes of construction and helping with jobs. We hope to break ground in three–four weeks. These rains may be a problem.

Bruce has also been working hard on the Turnbull Hall for Sefapanong Primary. The community is so excited. I met with the new principal yesterday. She was able to quote the prices of sand, concrete blocks, labour, and delivery. The whole community is involved and feels special. It will provide three new classrooms, a place of worship on Sundays, a community meeting place, and an income-generating opportunity to rent the space for weddings and funerals.

These past two weeks have been intense as we struggle to catch up, attend to emergent issues and meet local partners. Kathleen Lauder and Marie Cashion have been on the ground doing governance work for our YAH/CIDA-funded project. Marie has just left after two months visiting schools and meeting with officials on all levels of education to identify ways HL schools can more effectively communicate with decision makers. She has been wonderful, and we have all grown to love her. Through her, I have met and dined with the new Minister of Health, Dr. Ramatlapeng. I think she is going to be such a blessing to the country—she is smart and wise, and truly has the country's best interests at heart, coupled with the skills to get things done. She is now an enthusiastic HL supporter and will help us. Marie and I have also built relationships with the Clinton Foundation here. Everyone we meet is supportive and willing to assist us in various ways.

Kathleen is here for close to a month, has visited Bokoro schools, held a workshop for government and civil society, and has met with many partners. It's been fun to see her discover my world here for herself. She recently spent three days in Bokoro School, which her late daughter Mai-lin twinned with Ridgemont High School in Ottawa. Kathleen spent much of September and early October working on our Ottawa Ha!Man Benefit Concert to raise \$15,000 for the school. She was delighted to see it herself and was duly awed by the beauty of the remote mountain location and the courage of people struggling under such conditions.

Donna and I have met with the Sentebale Executive Director. This is the local arm of Prince Harry's Trust for Lesotho. They are willing to fund a staff member here and assist in other ways.

Our YAH youth (HL Basotho Youth Corps) ran a football (soccer) match this past weekend in Pitseng with teams from local villages to promote HIV/AIDS education and testing. They worked so hard and were

thrilled with the attendance. The community was impressed to see youth manage such a large undertaking. We went in support. It gave me a chance to see many of my young friends and catch up. I always wonder how each is doing. One cannot take health and well-being for granted here.

As I reconnect with these lovely young people, my various friends, and our project leaders, the tears and stories unfold. Each is pained underneath the brilliant smiles and gorgeous faces. Our mutual affection breaks through the reserve and the suffering is revealed. One 16-year-old young woman I love dearly has waited four months to tell me her mother and her only sibling is HIV positive. Her fear that they will die and leave her entirely alone is paralyzing. She had told no one. She lives in a boarding situation far from where they live and so can only surmise how they are doing. Communication here is almost impossible. She has no funds or access to a phone, no transportation money or permission to go and visit. Her school work is suffering. She worries constantly for their health. She has been in several of our leadership training programs and knows that one must eat fruits and vegetables to absorb the ARVs (anti-retroviral drugs). They have no money for food. As school closes for the year this month, she desperately wants to get a summer job to buy them food. There are no jobs, especially for a young girl with no skills. I worry this really special and very moral girl will feel compelled to prostitute herself to contribute to the family. This is how it goes.

As I sit comforting her, wiping her tears as this story unfolds from the secret place in her soul, I am aware that this is one girl and the story is painfully familiar. How can we help so many? I am asking around to make sure her mother gets into a support group for people living with AIDS. I cannot comfort her with the blasé assurance that her mother will be all right, or even live. Many still die, even on treatment. I cannot tell her that her ten-year-old brother will live. I think he will but am fearful to give her false hope. As she faces her final exams this next couple of weeks, I am struck by her courage to hold her head up and pretend that all is well with her friends. How many of us could do that, or be as selfless as this child is. I write this at 3:00 a.m. and am heavy with worry for her and her family.

Each case we take and do what we can. We do not forget them. We cannot solve every problem, fund every need. Although it is so difficult, I do see hundreds, even thousands who have been helped in some way, but HL and I remain acutely grateful for that. It is the antidote that keeps one optimistic amid the statistics.

I had lunch with the new Canadian Administrator of the Tsepong Clinic, Kate Jackson, across from our office. In the three years it has been operating, the clinic has done so much good in testing and treating people with HIV/AIDS. Before they came there was no treatment in this region at all. It is not a long time, but they have reached so many. Kate and I were commiserating about how much pain these people live with and how heroic they are to just keep going. We each see a different side of the same coin.

The St. Mary's girls are writing exams and will go home soon for the holidays. I love each one. We are happy to see each other. They are funded by St. Bart's Anglican Church in Ottawa for five years—two years left. The funding has given each of the 16 a life, a future, a safe place to live, and an education. HL tries to provide some parenting along the way.

We all worry about the hundreds of kids in our fold who grow up without any guidance: orphans who are stigmatized and abused, ignored and passed around from pillar to post, from grandmother to grandmother, relative to relative. Every small kindness and affirmation is received like water to a parched soul. I know the St. Mary's girls so well and am their mother in many ways. I admonish them when they need it as I would my own. They feel safe that someone cares enough to expect something more of them

than obedience. We would never expect our own children to become productive citizens without shepherding and support, yet these orphans are expected to do so. Positive comments are rare; everyone is too busy coping. No one has time.

I am happy to be back, doing what I can, supporting our amazing team, finding new options. Whichever side of the ocean I am on at any given time is where I think I can do the most good.

It is now 4:30 a.m. as I finish. I will send this today. My dear octogenarian who cares for us, Sr. Marie, has asked for a meeting before I go to the office. Her arthritis will no longer allow her to visit me at night for fear of falling on the narrow and completely dark path between the guest house and the convent. She feels obliged to meet with me every couple of days to reprimand me for working too hard. It is a ritual we have and both love. She is so tiny, old, and so loved by all. She considers it her national duty to look after me, which means starchy food and lectures. It is wonderful to have her here.

I wish I could write more to individuals while in Lesotho. There is much to say and many thanks to give. Please forgive these mass communications, but know that you are separately in my thoughts much more than you can imagine. When I meet a sponsored child and she regales me with tales of her sponsor's wonderful letters, see a grandmother given hope and support, or visit a school blessed by your donations, I do give thanks and write you in my head. One day, perhaps I will have time to put all to text for each one. For now, I must attend to the challenges and the children. My love and thanks.

## November 29 2007

As I get ready to return to Canada, so much has happened that it will be challenging to be concise. Lesotho is blossoming with the summer flowers and the predictable sense of renewed energy that spring brings. The juxtaposition of desperate need with incredible beauty and determination rises again.

I am thrilled to announce that the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) has not only renewed Thusa Lesotho (our registered NGO in Lesotho) funding for the staff position of Orphan and Vulnerable Children Support Officer (OSO) for a second year but has generously recognized the expansion of our grandmother programs in the mountains to fund a second position for a Grandmother Support Officer (GSO). In our discussions, the SLF has acknowledged that the work far exceeds the capacity of one person to administer these essential services to grandmothers who would otherwise have no support. The various programs are largely funded by our HL Grandmother Groups (the Kingston Grandmother Connection, Go-Go Grannies(Toronto), Grandmothers Helping Grandmothers (Fredericton) and the Amazing Mamas (Guelph)), but the need for personnel to run these programs has been a serious barrier to our delivery of the programs. We are grateful and delighted.

We have hired two wonderful women to do this important work. 'M'e Mampaka Kunene (OSO) has extensive experience as District Coordinator for the Early Childhood Education Association of Lesotho. She is compassionate, efficient and totally committed to the children of her country. She will administer the Child Sponsorship Program, and the Orphan Relief and Achievers' Funds in all our ten villages. 'M'e Mapoloko Leteka is our new GSO, with years of community-based experience with CARE Lesotho, a gracious and caring nature and a delight in pioneering this program. These two women are wonderful and will make a terrific team as two sides of the same coin, and will greatly enhance our ability to meet the needs of hundreds of children and grandmothers. The funding also includes the purchase of a good

used truck to allow the women to reach these remote areas. After three years doing all this “on public,” we are so grateful for the support.

Our new grandmother programs include our **Grandmothers’ Day**, once a month in each village. The grandmothers (and grandfathers) who look after so many orphans will be able to come together at a scheduled day each month for nourishing food, singing, support building and education. They will receive education on their own HIV vulnerability; local partner services they may not be aware of; how to give psycho-social support for their grandchildren who are suffering from grief, loss, and depression; understand the issues of sexual violence, gender equity, etc. Local partners will give talks on nursing people with HIV/AIDS, AIDS treatment and testing, school news, laws to protect vulnerable children, and orphans and women’s rights. Local women will be hired to make the food and for one day a month, these grandparents will be served and looked after. We will also hold **Grandmother Conferences** twice a year to bring these grandmothers from different villages together for two days to inspire and encourage each other, with a full and useful Sesotho program to address their particular needs. This past week, Konesoang has been in Thaba Tseka to deliver emergency food packages to 300 grandmothers in dire need to tide them over until their gardens start producing.

On the subject of grandmothers, our five-member Help Lesotho Committee at **Masonville Manor Retirement Residence** in London, ON raised more than \$4,200 at its tea in November. The extraordinary thing is that the committee members’ own ages range from octogenarians Dorothy Parnell (88) and Fran Thompson (87), to nonagenarians Estelle Brown (90), Flo Anderson (92) and Helen Gendron (94). They clearly believe one is never too old to make a difference!

We have hired a new accountant, funded solely and anonymously by one generous woman from Ottawa. The requirements of our financial accountability are arduous and time consuming. Lillo Letsie is a fine young man with previous experience in QuickBooks, the accounting software we use in both countries. I will be posting the bios and photos of our new staff members on the web as soon as I can.

The past few years have been at a breakneck speed and taxed each one of us to the limit. These additional staff will make all the difference in delivering the quality of services we are committed to. Without this donor support, it would be impossible. Raising funds for staff is the most difficult part of our job and yet essential to the delivery of the programs.

I accompanied a woman to test for HIV last week and was again reminded of how terrifying this process is for the Basotho. As we waited hand-in-hand for her results, I remembered all the children, leaders and others with whom I have gone for testing. It is a life-transforming experience, filled with such abject fear of a negative result. Images permeate with projections of what will happen; notions of death, anxiety about discrimination and loneliness are real and often paralyzing. Overcoming this milestone is quite something to witness. Some of course are positive. Knowing one’s status is the power that protects and transforms. We are there to support the aftermath. Each of our programs ends with HIV testing, after extensive HIV/AIDS education. In the past two years, we have facilitated the testing of over 4,000 individuals: grandmothers, orphans, leaders, youth and teachers.

As I daily watch the steady stream of people at our office, humiliated to ask for help, I am consoled that we have received 14 new child sponsors in the past three weeks. Child sponsorship is the single most important thing we do to save the children — and often the grandmothers through the Granny’s Child Fund. It is hard to say thank you adequately.

One man and his daughter walked two hours over the mountains to the office a couple of days ago. The mother and three siblings had died of AIDS. The father looked as if he too was ready to expire. They sought sponsorship for this incredibly bright and articulate child who is going into high school. Although 13, she looked about six years old. Our intern, Sonya Kalyniak, was almost in tears interviewing them as this child interpreted for her unilingual Sesotho father. His eyes were hollow; his face gaunt as he tried to find some provision for his daughter before he too died. Sonya was unsure if he would be able to make it home without expiring. She was able to give them money from the Orphan Relief Fund to provide transport for them for their trip home. We will find this child a sponsor.

Last week, I went to a funeral in the village of Pitseng. The gentleman who died was the husband of one of our principals, 'M'e Mapalesa Mokefane of Bokoro High School. There were probably 150 villagers attending, with many coming from afar to acknowledge their respect for 'M'e. It was about a four-hour affair with various speeches, a feast and a grave-side ceremony. Not understanding a word of it, I pondered about all the funerals held that day in Lesotho, of the funds to feed the mourners, of the loss of productivity in the country and the persistence of death.

The 16 girls from the **St. Mary's Project** are like my daughters. When they return from summer holidays, they will begin their fourth year in the project — educated, fed, clothed and housed by **St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church** in Ottawa. I have watched them grow from awkward little grade 8 girls to beautiful young women. Ten attend local high schools and have just finished exams. Six attend a spectacularly kind home-economics school, St. Mary's Mazerella, in the village of Maputsoe. They take academic subjects and learn to sew, knit and do pattern design for future employment. The girls were so proud to show me what they had made and are happy to be succeeding. I admonish these 16 when they transgress, praise them when they do well and give them the kind of parenting every child wants. St. Bart's has made such a difference to their lives. Each one has a mentor who writes monthly for encouragement and lets them know they are cared about. These mentors are so loved by each girl. If anyone knows of a group which would like to raise a bit of money to help the school pay for the sewing and knitting materials for all 60 girls, please let me know. The school tries to provide these at no cost as most cannot afford to pay. The school sells the finished products at the end of the year for a tiny amount to try to recoup some of the cost of the fabric and wool.

We are all preparing for the six-day Annual HL Leadership Camp January 12 – 17 in Pitseng for 250 orphans, vulnerable children, teachers and principals. Although it is a back-breaking amount of work, the days at camp are amazing. The kids look forward to it all year. This brings children from all our ten villages together, from very remote schools, to learn about leadership in their communities, gender equity, HIV/AIDS education, communication and becoming a good problem solver. It is so much fun. Invitations have been sent out, transport money dispensed and the program is being finalized. Last year, every principal tested for HIV, about 90% of the kids and almost all the teachers (other than the ones who knew they were positive). This year Stacy Clark and her partner, Dean, will do confidence-enhancing circus work with the kids in the afternoons and end with a performance. We are all looking forward to the camp and seeing so many of the children.

I return to Lesotho at the beginning of January with Carolyn Kennedy. I will stay for two months. We will be winding up the CIDA-funded project with the Institute on Governance, which ends in March. It has been a really worthwhile experience through which we have learned a lot, built many partnerships and developed our governance approaches.



I take this opportunity to wish you all a lovely holiday season. Without your support, none of this could have happened. We think of Help Lesotho as a family, all working together for the sake of the children — thank you sincerely for being part of it.