



2010

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Winter-Spring 2010 – Letter #1

I came to Lesotho two weeks ago still reflecting on the recent celebrations of Help Lesotho’s Fifth Anniversary with the five-day visit of King Letsie III in Ottawa. It was a huge success and a humbling honour to host His Majesty. With the guidance and incredibly hard work of Jennifer Parr and Mary Ann Turnbull, our wonderful committee, board and the small Canadian staff, we planned and executed the visit and events in six weeks! That too shall go down on the list of major accomplishments!! You will enjoy seeing the photos, news coverage and videos; visit <http://helplesotho.ca/hl5news.html>. We have harvested most of the coverage and you can review it at your leisure. There is even a lovely commemorative book we are proud of. The fifth anniversary celebration in Lesotho will be combined with the opening of the Seotlong Centre in Hlotse on March 6, 2010.

As we begin our second five years, Help Lesotho now has a professional, dedicated and talented staff team in both countries leading us forward. It is exciting. Soon we will have a new home and facilities to make our work so much easier and to expand the reach of our programs. We welcome our new Leadership Program Manager, Ntate Ponya Ramollo. He is a seasoned program leader with a background in education, a specialty in HIV/AIDS training and a love of youth. ‘M’e Maseretse Ratia, our dear ‘M’e Ratia’s daughter, joins us as the Youth and Leadership Officer. The teams are complete and keen to start 2010 together.

This wonderful teamwork was so evident at the fifth annual six-day leadership camp, which ended on Saturday, January 16. We rented facilities from the school for the deaf across from our new leadership centre. We hosted

230 participants: students from our 15 twinned schools, sponsored children, teachers, principals and the eight granny leads from the villages. Under the fabulous organization of intern Lara Cousins and program assistant Palesa Sehalahala, everything went smoothly. The logistics of the camp were incredible in every way and it was a feat of many months' work. Participants came from the villages across the mountains eager to meet new friends, have memorable experiences, enjoy nutritious food and learn new ways to cope with the painful and often overwhelming challenges they face. Our trained youth leaders (Help Lesotho Leader Corps) are a huge help.

We began with a reinstatement of our vision for the camp. Each participant was told that he or she had been chosen. At least one person in the world truly believes that he or she can be a leader in Lesotho. Each one is special and because Lesotho needs strong leaders perhaps more than anything, each is charged with the responsibility of returning to their village, school or granny group to spread the information and encouragement. The ten sessions each participated in were carefully designed to inform, inspire and comfort. Sessions on grief and loss, HIV/AIDS, self-esteem and self-awareness, conflict resolution, decision making, leadership and power, gender, intimate health and well-being, and journaling were steeped in culturally significant examples. Myths were addressed, misery acknowledged and injustice proclaimed.



About half the campers were new – and it was the first time many were out of their villages or with children they did not know. (The first two days are a predictably frightening experience facing such novelty and being declared a young leader! Once the sleeping arrangements, frightful bed bugs, water supply and group assignments are established, the children open up like a botanical garden in bloom.) If words had the power to describe the transformation of lonely, frightened, often abused and endlessly worried children and adults into happy, satisfied, comforted human beings, I could convey the power of a safe environment, good food, trust and love.

'M'e Ntea and I conducted ten two-hour sessions on grief and loss. Imagine an entire week of talking about death! In the Basotho culture, death is not discussed with children. Usually on the day of the death, an elder whispers the news into the child's ear while she sleeps. The funeral and following feast are considered adequate and no more is said. A mother may be buried in the night and the child is told she has gone away. Clarification is not provided as to whether the mother has abandoned her child, is dead, will come back or has suffered some other unimaginable tragedy. The child is not to ask questions and possessions of the deceased are taken away on the theory that forgetting is the best approach and that children do not have feelings about such matters.

For many the grief and loss session at leadership camp is the first time these horrific events are addressed and subsequent feelings are acknowledged. For the first time, they are told it is not their fault when someone dies, their anger toward God for taking away their loved one is addressed, helpful coping strategies are provided. The

pain in these eyes breaks my heart. Some openly admit their feelings of loss, loneliness, fear and isolation. Others cannot speak at all – it is too painful. To see a huge young boy admit to feelings of suicide and abandonment is to know the constant pain these children live with. To hear the little ones talk of how unsafe and unprotected they feel is to know this camp is the first and only solace they have known. Although perhaps the most difficult session they have, this one rates among the highest in participants’ evaluations. No one lives easily with the feelings of being forgotten!

The welcoming program announced the winners of our camp scholarships for speeches on gender and leadership. Students from Help Lesotho’s twinned schools and sponsored children may submit entries anytime during the year. This is an exciting literacy activity and a voice for their understanding. The winners are congratulated, given small gifts, certificates and about \$71 CAD, invariably used for new glasses or food. The



winners of the two **Shelagh M’Gonigle Gender Awards** (one for girls and one for boys) and of the **Sandra and Paul Hellyer Leadership Award** proudly read their thoughtful dissertations to the assembly. A proud moment! These speeches were posted throughout the camp for all to read and on our website.

The craft table was popular with previously unknown symbols of colour, happiness and fancy. While the children decorated their name tags and pored over their projects, we blessed the people who provided the materials.

Morning programs were serious and tough; afternoons were filled with fun games around communication and HIV/AIDS awareness with local partners (note the new centre in the background of the photo of the kids playing). Evening programs were talent shows where the children sang and performed dramas and poems on the unsolicited topics of death, abuse, the value of education and the effects of AIDS on their daily lives. These themes never leave them. This is life in Lesotho!

Feeding 230 people here is formidable. Carefully planned meals provided nutritious and economical food for the body just as the sessions provided food for the spirit. Four local cooks worked from 6 am to 10 pm to stoke the fires, peel the endless carrots and potatoes, boil more than 1,000 eggs, chop untold heads of cabbage, wash



hundreds of apples and stir who knows how many tons of *pappa*. Most of these children live on little else but this empty-calorie starchy food staple. *Pappa* provides the weight in the stomach to trick the mind into feeling full. They love it and feel few meals are complete without a mountain of *pappa*. Twice-daily snacks are juice and apples and the once-a-day beloved biscuits. Night snacks are small bags of *simbas* (raisins and peanuts). Despite generous servings and balanced meals, these poverty-stricken children rarely feel full as the body anticipates future empty stomachs. Starvation mentality cannot be satiated in six days.

The eight granny leads came to camp hungrily anticipating the education which would equip them to cope with the 50 grannies under each of their care. Each session empowered them to help the grannies with their frightful pain, loss, worry and poverty. Each session offered new ideas for the grannies to deal with their orphans. Their group included five young nuns from the Anglican and Catholic local congregations who played with the orphans and learned to be a meaningful force of change in their villages and work assignments. This year we included an elderly, illiterate gentleman who guards our buildings and helps in any way he can. His honour in being included, even if he could not understand most of what was said, was graphically illustrated by his pride in carrying his notebook and pen. Although nothing was written in that booklet, like the children he was part of something important and he was special too. This emaciated gentleman relished the food and the singing. We all want to belong.

Special guests were invited on the Wednesday of leadership camp. These community leaders attended the daily classes and had their eyes opened to the power of care and education. They attended my full afternoon session on psychology and gained strategies to help themselves and their work. Our community engagement is important and over these five years has been a significant outreach.



The penultimate afternoon was devoted to HIV/AIDS counselling and testing – it is so crucial to know your status. We continue to work to promote follow up for the children and teachers who learn they are positive.

The final evening was a dance. How these Basotho can dance! Our staff, teachers and children expressed their joy and sense of community in the wonderful singing and dancing so beloved here. It is such fun and a happy release.

As we hugged goodbye to the children and teachers who had come so far, gave out their packed lunches of the nutritious sandwiches, drink, apple and *simbas* that our staff had spent many hours making, we blessed every sponsor and donor who had made this possible. Knowing the lives transformed and the endless appreciation of all 1,200 camp attendees in the past five years, the tireless work and energy are again declared well spent! Even the lack of water in the girls/staff area for three days, the horrible mattresses and the long hours are forgotten as we stumble home to rest, renewed and inspired by the children and another year of service.

The next two months will be intense as we try to get as many children into school as possible to start this new school year, conduct our youth trainings and finish the Seotlong Centre in Hlotse. Construction is behind due to weather and the predictable challenges associated with large building projects. Until it is complete, we will be anxious and tasked with endless details and follow ups to get electricity on site and furnishings and lighting in place. Donna Bawden has been my outstanding right hand on these two centre constructions these past two years. She and I fantasize about life without construction! The generosity of the Facet Foundation and our many donors is making this dream a reality. It *must* all be in place for the March 6 opening. Since the camp, it has

rained constantly. The site is a field of mud. Local workers put in long hours, even on weekends. I cannot rest until I see it standing firmly, furnished efficiently and filled with books, children, grannies, youth and kindness.

As an aside, people often ask what they can provide. We are desperate for outstanding, culturally relevant and meaningful DVDs (Afro-centred if possible). We were given a TV to run educational videos for the youth and children at the centres. Every Friday hordes of young people come to see what the screen will reveal. We have run out of material. We would welcome inspirational DVDs on literacy (Sesame Street, Veggie Tales, etc.), leadership, HIV/AIDS, animals, math, science, values, Bible stories, geography or any such non-western educational topics. Please send them to our Ottawa office and they can be brought over when our board chair, Jennifer Parr, comes in early March for the opening. We cannot play VHS tapes but DVDs are easy to transport.

As I write, the skies threaten yet one more day of storms and mud. The tires of the truck were sunk a good foot into the mud yesterday where I stay. Walking is perilous in this muck. Gardens are being watered as we all stand on alert for those horrific, sudden thunderstorms so dangerous in these mountains.

Another year of service lies before us! We are prepared and excited to face 2010 and its challenges. Plans are in place, visions are renewed and our conviction of the value of our work is strengthened.

Month One of our second five years starts well!

Winter-Spring 2010 – Letter #2

For the past two weeks there has been a gradual subsiding of the storms but they come again, unbidden and sudden. When it is not raining I am sure the temperature is around 30 degrees Celsius. One must always be prepared for these torrential deluges.

Many days I need a four-wheel drive just to get from my place to the tarred road or to leave the yard. I have been seriously stuck twice and had to be towed. I had a hilarious standoff with a cow yesterday – our big truck and her! She was determined to get those last mouthfuls of wet grass before she would move. We eyed each other for some time before she decided to be gracious enough to let me pass!!!!

The Grandmother Day in Pitseng this week was quite wonderful. As we arrived, the grannies sang their harmonized song about Help Lesotho, about how they have changed and become strong. The original 200 grannies have been transformed in the past two years by the program. They are now healthy! They have had good food, had their huts fixed and now are safe from rain, snow and intruders. Each has a keyhole garden and the seeds to grow her own food. Each has been tested and knows her HIV/AIDS status; each has had education on home care, on how to deal with her orphans and on coping strategies for death and loss. Village support networks have been set up for mutual support and small income-generating projects. Even visually, the grandmothers are different women. They are no longer forgotten, depressed and hopeless. They have shared their learning and new understandings with those around them and see their power to help others.

The pain does continue. One granny lost a daughter last month and then, two days before the Grandmother Day, she lost another daughter. Although heartbreaking to the extreme, she now has people to turn to and the encouragement to go on.

Our grandmother program is such a fine outreach for these women. They view the Canadian grannies who help them with awe and love. I told them about the Fifth Anniversary Celebration in Ottawa and the videos of them dancing and singing on display for all to see. What joy this brought!!!! Even King Letsie III knows of them and honours their growth!

The difficult decision to phase out this group over the next several months has been made and presented to them. I was relieved to know they accepted this with grace and gratitude. They understood that it is now time for a new group of 200 grannies to have this same opportunity. New grannies are being chosen now and there will be an overlap of several months for a gradual and successful transition. We are proud of the sustainable way in which this program has built them up to be village leaders and allowed them to manage for themselves. The new grannies will be provided with the initial program and the outreach and transition will be handled with care and love.

The Pitseng Centre is a joy and now starts a new group of trained youth and a new program of community outreach to more out-of-school youth who cannot afford the school fees to continue and have few future prospects. This group is a current priority for both centres as they are at great risk. Many are young men who become so despondent that their depression and anger at the world for their losses and poverty leads them to drugs, alcohol and crime. This group is hard to reach and prone to perpetrating sexual abuse and violence on girls and grannies. We have new programs for them and great staff to engage them. We hope to see the same kind of changes that we have witnessed in the grannies and other leadership participants. Now that we have the facilities, we will take on the young men in a big way. There is a *pitso* (community gathering initiated by the chief) called for February 28 after church to announce the programs and support available for these out-of-school youth. They too will learn that they are not forgotten and will be most welcome at the centres for literacy and support. Seven young men came yesterday asking for sessions on drug and alcohol! We were all tearful with joy and know that they will help us engage their friends.

It was a happy time visiting Raphoka Primary School. This poor Anglican school has new gardens, flowers and encouragement to become a better school. Hopewell School in Ottawa has taken them on as a twin and this has given them new life.

Pontmain Primary, under the wise leadership of 'M'e Mantoetsi, has waited a couple of years for a new school twin and they are excited to build a new relationship with St. Francis of Assisi in Ottawa.

My dear friend and co-conspirator, Sr. Alice, is the new principal of Pitseng High School where we have so many sponsored children. She has recently been transferred from St. Charles High School. This will benefit Pitseng students enormously and provide new life for the school. We so enjoyed our visit together and look forward to the next one. I brought the Anniversary Book for her and she was delighted to see her photo and the wonderful news of the celebration.

On Tuesday I drove to Maseru to see His Majesty. We had a lovely visit and reminisced about his special visit to Ottawa and the wonderful donors he met. He too was delighted with the Anniversary Book and appreciative of the events and meetings. I also brought him a selection of the newspaper articles that covered his visit so that he could see the actual photos and articles. Among the things we discussed was his part in the centre opening

on March 6. The town of Hlotse and surrounding area is priming for his visit and that of our board chair, Jennifer Parr, and her son, as well as Sandra and Paul Hellyer and Mr. Graff to open the facility.

I have been on site once or twice a day, moving things forward on landscaping, furnishings, lighting, bookshelves for the library, kitchen design to feed hundreds at a time. Curtains are being made and decorations prepared. Each partner school is making a poster for the walls. Each grandmother group is making flowerpots, mats or decorations. The endless rain is not helpful for construction! Key local government personnel and chiefs are involved and our staff is making Herculean efforts to get everything ready on time. The Support Centre will not be complete for the opening but the ground floor will be as ready as possible. Construction everywhere is challenging but here it is painful. We are all panicking a bit and hoping that all these pieces fall into place in time.

On my way out of town, I visited the Bytown Orphanage to see Sr. Margaret and the children. The place looks beautiful with flowers, a proud flag standard, new water tank, security fence at the gate and supplies. The rains have again decimated the road in and I thought of the vehicle shocks many times navigating the caverns in the road. My hour-and-a-half uninterrupted visit with Sr. Margaret was special to both of us. She is such a dear and now has two office staff, donated office furniture and a new and dedicated full-time teacher for the children's educational support. She still works hard but no longer has to put in the impossible hours she used to. She looks healthier and relaxed. I even had a visit with their four cows and especially 'M'e Helen's cow!!! All are doing well. The rental units are providing monthly income, which, along with the child sponsorships and garden, gives her predictable financial relief. My great joy was to see one of the little girls I have known for years. She is AIDS positive and on ARV drugs. After many years, she is now largely over the trauma of her early childhood abuse and loss and no longer sobs when she sees me. She, like all the children at the centre, feels loved, wanted and cared for. Seventeen percent of the children are HIV positive. One's heart soars to see these orphans so well looked after.

Our focus for two years on raising funds for the centres must now return to child sponsorship and especially orphan relief. One young man came to me yesterday to ask for support for the orphan he looks after. There is no money for school fees and so she sits home alone every day. Recently she was raped and he was in tears asking if we can help her so that she will be with other children and not alone. Our child sponsorship funds are all allocated for 2010. Unless we get new sponsors, we cannot help any more students this year, no matter how desperate their circumstances are. As you can imagine, it was a tough conversation for both of us. 'M'e Mampaka has the task of saying no to the children and guardians and we try to give her the emotional support she needs for this painful task. Many of these little ones are starving and look at us through shy, haunted eyes. One does not know what to do!

Today, we will be thankful for all those we can and do help. That is the way here; we do what we can with the funds provided and are thankful for each child, youth, school and granny who receives help, in whatever form.

We are always consoled by the knowledge that if our donors could see the wonderful work being done, they would be so proud to be part of the Help Lesotho family! Their faithfulness in last year's economic downturn will never be forgotten.

One day at a time!

Winter-Spring 2010 – Letter #3

As we rose into the mountains, the astonishing beauty of Lesotho revealed itself in the splendour of the valleys, streams, alpine flowers and lofty heights. After years of drought, the relentless rains of the past two months had refreshed the soil and manifested the grace and awesome loveliness of the mountains. Breathtaking!

'M'e Mampaka (Help Lesotho's Orphan and Schools Officer), 'M'e Makatleho (our Grandmother Support Officer), Lara Cousins (our intern) and I travelled to the centre of Lesotho into the heights of Thaba Tseka this past week to visit Help Lesotho partner schools and grannies. As usual, we stayed at the priest's house at the Paray Mission and confronted the relentless challenges of poverty, lack of resources and isolation. Five schools, approximately 75 sponsored children and 50 grannies in Thaba Tseka benefit from our programs. It is difficult to manage our work there with no office or resident staff to support the activities. The number of child-headed households and the starvation, unemployment and destitution are haunting and drive us to try harder and explore new ways to support these people. They need us beyond our capacity to deliver but we share the certainty that all we do here is keeping people alive and children in school and restoring hope.

Since my last visit, the one main road has been tarred! I was incredulous! The road is still filled with horses, beasts of burden and weary pedestrians. This newly tarred road is a visual representation of progress. It reduces the mud surrounding the tin shops and the children and grannies who are the street vendors with their few pieces of fruit, sweets or wares to sell.

We visited Sefapanong Primary, twinned with Ottawa's Turnbull School. This small, isolated school remains over-crowded and struggling but has benefitted so much from the shoes and uniforms donated by Turnbull. The hall, donated by Mary Ann Turnbull, was filled with 76 Grade 7 students in a math lesson. Math, science and English remain the most difficult subjects throughout the school system and are generally responsible for the high failure rates. Many teachers are unqualified or struggle with these subjects themselves. They do their best. The school was resplendent in summer flowers, tenderly maintained by the children and teachers. The tiny crowded office proudly displayed the many art pieces from Turnbull School children. Village ladies tended the fire, cut cabbage and cooked the weak bean soup for the children's lunch. There are 82 children in a Grade 2 class; 126 in the Grade 3 class.

Similarly, Paray Primary, twinned with John McCrea Elementary in Guelph, received us with joy and appreciation for their place in the Help Lesotho family. It was a happy sight to see the new track suits and shoes on the little ones, who otherwise would be so very cold in the long winter months. They are just simply adorable! John McCrea has been a faithful twin and the entire school sends its love. We visited with the principal, 'M'e Maboleng, and her deputy, 'M'e Marion. These women strive against unfathomable odds to educate, feed and encourage over 400 children. We are honoured by their friendship.

Katlehong Primary, twinned with Corpus Christie Elementary in Ottawa, has painted "Help Lesotho" and a resemblance of the Canadian Flag on an exterior wall to show the entire community that they too are part of the Help Lesotho family and therefore valued. With over 850 children, they struggle in the painfully over-crowded classrooms, under excellent leadership and commitment to good education. All teachers here speak English to the children to improve their results. Corpus Christie has taken on this challenge with dedication and spectacular results, providing water to the school, track suits and shoes for the children, new desks and encouraging letters.

Its principal, 'M'e Mpho, and I discussed the ongoing problem of the pit latrines (outhouses) for this massive student body. It is a common problem for our three primary schools here — and throughout the country for that matter. Sefapanong has not been able to use its pit latrines for as long as I can remember. The Lesotho Ministry of Education is responsible for sending a truck to empty the latrines. The truck never comes. The latrines are full to the unhealthiest level imaginable. Girls cannot come to school when they have their periods as there is no place to go to the bathroom. Katlehong latrines are so solidified that it is no longer possible to empty them. Imagine 850 children with no place to go to the bathroom. This may seem an indelicate problem to discuss publicly but the reality is that the water table is contaminated and the children have no toilets.

I had tried in the past to intervene in this matter many times, to no avail. This time, I was not going to leave Thaba Tseka without solving it. I immediately gathered 'M'e Mpho, her deputy and 'M'e Mampaka and headed to the office of the District Administrator (DA). The DA is comparable to the provincial premier and new to the position. He was offsite at a meeting. We drove to the remote conference centre where he was supposed to be. Not there! We targeted the only other meeting place in town and announced that we wanted to see the DA. We waited. He did, in fact, interrupt his meeting to join us and discuss this issue. I impressed upon him that Help Lesotho was supporting the five schools in the area and we were acting as a group and expected the community and government to deal with this issue immediately. I invited him to the centre opening on March 6 and told him the King was coming. I showed him the Fifth Anniversary book to highlight the level of support and exposure Help Lesotho has in the country. I used every persuasive strategy I could think of. We cannot fund all the necessities of these schools, but we can certainly advocate on their behalf and exert as much pressure as possible. The fact that the King will celebrate his birthday in July in Thaba Tseka worked in our favour.

After close to 45 minutes of ardent discussion, he agreed to a personal visit that afternoon to Katlehong to see for himself. In the end, within two days, they visited both Paray Primary and Katlehong and promised to build new latrines at Katlehong, empty the ones at Paray Primary and deal with the ones at Sefapanong. On Ash Wednesday, the day following our meeting, the local priest announced to the congregation that parents and guardians of Paray Primary students were expected to come, pour water down the latrines and stir the contents by hand so that the truck could empty them. Few came. Another call was made at the regular service on Sunday. Unless the contents were liquefied enough, the trucks could not be successful. Such are the basic issues the community must deal with! Our three partner schools cannot believe their good fortune to have this level of success in such a short time. Their appreciation brought tears to my eyes. We will follow up and see what actual results are accomplished within the next couple of weeks.

We also spent hours at Paray High School and Thaba Tseka High School visiting sponsored children, ensuring they had their books, picking up letters for sponsors and handing out the shop vouchers for their uniforms and shoes. The local shop, "Pep," provides us with a 5% discount and facilitates the transactions. Our policy to buy as locally as possible provides a great deal of revenue for the communities and we insist they also contribute with a discount and a few extra "presents" of goods for the orphans. It is an excellent arrangement and they are grateful for our business. As most children have never had new shoes, they do not know their shoe sizes. We made foot templates on pieces of paper of each student's shoe size so that the school's Help Lesotho orphan lead liaison can accurately list the sizes required. As the drivers, 'M'e Mampaka and I went "up and down," as they say here, to ensure the goods were delivered, ordered and paid for. It takes hours to get the previous year's results on who has been blessed enough to pass these impossible exams, who has moved and who is in

need. 'M'e noted the children who had no soap or shampoo. The details were endless and it was all done by hand. 'M'e counselled the children and noted the recent losses and health issues. Lara helped with the recording and in-take forms for potential sponsored children as we live in the hope of engaging new sponsors — as do they!

I met with the local Grandmother Committee of six grannies, who help make the decisions for the granny program in Thaba Tseka. What wonderful women. They arrived at 9 am for our 2 pm appointment to clean the dark, crumbling meeting room. They discussed the transition of the 200 grannies out of the program and recruitment of the new group of 200. The grannies regaled me with stories of the changes in their lives. We discussed the income-generating projects and sustainability issues. Arrangements had been made by 'M'e Makatleho with the Ministry of Forestation and Agriculture for the grannies to start growing tree seedlings. The ministry agreed to purchase all seedlings over 15 cm high. This is an excellent project as the planting and care for the seedlings is physically manageable for the grannies and fills a defined market need. We will purchase the seedlings and they will keep and reinvest the profit.

The Grandmother Day on the following morning was a joy. When the grannies arrived, I could hardly recognize them. The comment was that they were so old and depressed when they came into the program and now they are young and growing younger! Because of the food parcels and seeds, they have been transformed from ill and weak women who were waiting to die, to healthy and motivated women who know their HIV/AIDS status and how to protect themselves, have seeds for the gardens and food for their bellies and orphans. They sing and dance with a sense of hope and appreciation that would make each and every granny program donor proud. The food parcels kept them and the little ones alive all winter and gave them food until the gardens could produce. Several confessed that they no longer drink to drown their sorrows. They told me they have much better relationships with their orphans and have new strategies on how to help them. They are no longer paralyzed with worry and fear.

I told them about the granny donors and how they raise funds. I told them that the Canadian women are grannies too and not wealthy people but that they help in the amounts they can manage and think of the grannies so often. They discussed ways they could support the new granny group and pass on their learning and the care they have received. As I listened to each heartfelt speech, I was touched anew by their happiness and gratitude for the benefits from the program. They no longer feel alone or isolated. They have village support groups and now do crafts together to sell. With great pride they showed me a craft display containing their wares for market. I bought two large mats made of braided plastic bags for welcome mats for our new centre. Several pledged to use their own meagre funds to travel to the opening in a gesture of thanks for Help Lesotho and will bring things to sell. I was instructed to tell the Canadian grannies that:

“We love them so much and we pray for them to carry on with their good works. We were so old and now we are getting young with this food and education. We are now doing productive things and feel blessed that the grannies love us and know us.”

They proudly wore their Help Lesotho red plastic bracelets and T-shirts on which is written in Sesotho: “together we can do well”, which reinforces to them that they are part of the Help Lesotho family and not alone.

At the end of the day the prearranged “taxi” did not arrive to take the ones who live the furthest away so I drove them in the rain, picking up the ones in bare feet (clutching their worn shoes to preserve them) and canes. One wonderful blind woman inspired me with her smiles and optimism. The little orphan who lives with her and guides her steps is adorable, in rags and so tiny! This little one sat silently all day beside her granny during the meeting. She too enjoyed the lunch. I have known this granny and one of her older orphaned granddaughters for years. She wove me a small, perfect basket that I later gave to my sister Anne. When I dropped off the granny at the point beyond which the truck could not go, I marvelled at her tenacity and the skill with which she walked the remaining 50 yards to her hut precariously perched on a steep mountainside. How she manages living on an angle like that in her blindness is mindboggling. We loaded the back of the truck with the huge pots, dishes and portable stove used to feed the grannies and returned it to the storage place. Although each of us was entirely drenched and cold from the torrents of rain pelting our skin and clothes, it was a marvellous day!

The next day I visited several of the grannies’ gardens and they proudly showed me the spinach, cabbage, beets and maize they were growing with the seeds. I went to several of the huts we had repaired to marvel at the doors that now fit and the thatch that now covered the previous holes. One tiny hut had had no windows, but the resident granny and her grandchildren proudly showed me the new two-foot-square windows that now brought light and air to her abode. About 50 grannies and orphans met me at one home for a long visit. The honour they feel that I have personally visited them where they live humbles me and renews my dedication to this remarkable and highly successful program. The new life it has brought blesses us all.

As we descended the mountain roads back to Hlotse to face the panic and challenge of the centre completion and opening, we all felt stronger and grateful to be part of an organization that values each person’s health, education and need to feel some hope. It is no small thing we do!

Winter-Spring 2010 – Letter #4

As you know, the centre opening is this Saturday, March 6. I have attached the program below so that you may feel a part of this. How we wish each and every person who has donated to this project could be here with us to know what a spectacular facility this will be very shortly. We think of St. Georges-On-the-Hill Anglican Church in Etobicoke, George Vanee, Linda Padfield, Dorothy Parnell and so many others.

The buildings will indeed be fabulous once finished and offer both space and sanctuary to thousands of people. However, at the time of the opening, they are not finished! The Support Centre won't be finished for another six weeks. The Graff Leadership Centre will be more complete but have no roof, floors or furnishing. Our staff are working tirelessly to get visual, happy things done such as beautiful, bright African-print curtains hung in the few rooms that will be presentable, delightful posters made by the children from all our partner schools, cut outs of traced children's hands to spell out *LEADERS NEVER GIVE UP!* The landscaping is progressing and looks lovely. The kitchen will be in some yet-to-be-determined state of readiness but, regardless, we must provide a feast for the expected 1000-1400 people who will come. The road is being levelled, driveways made, garbage outside the fence taken away, water and sewage pipes laid. Workmen are on-task seven days a week. The project is over-budget now and we have no recourse to cut costs at this point.

Our cramped office has barely room to move – with all the people and items stored in every nook and cranny. Our little training room has been diminished to a quarter of the space as it is piled to the ceiling with the plastic training tables and the more than 100 plastic chairs, white boards, gas canisters for cooking, pots, bunk beds and bedding for the hostel, books for the libraryand on and on. We are almost immobilized until the centre is opening but everyone is good natured and managing the best way possible.

The program is set and will be a testimony to the power of children, youth and grannies to rise about their suffering and grow to be healthy, productive citizens. We don't want to focus on ourselves but rather the potential for community strengthening and the worth and promise in focusing on children. I have discussed the program with His Majesty and asked him to appeal to the out-of-school youth whom we plan to target in our programs. As those of you who met him know, he is most willing to help us in any way he can. The Reserve Chief, with our Leadership Program Manager Ntate Ponya, are hosting a *Pitso* (public gathering) this afternoon in the area to tell villagers about the centre opening and to encourage youth to participate in the centre programming. There will be one girl, one out-of-school youth, one principal (from Sefapanong) and one granny speak briefly on how their population has blossomed with support and to encourage hope in those in attendance that they too can become community leaders.

I am at the site daily, sometimes three and four times. There are many decisions to be made and multiple trades to monitor. We are all terribly disappointed with the slow progress on the building and are resigned that this will not spoil such a special day. As well as the opening, we celebrate Help Lesotho's Fifth Anniversary in Lesotho.

I meet weekly with the District Administrator (comparable to the provincial premier), the police and District Counsel Secretary of the Local government as they prepare to host His Majesty. This is the work of many dozen people to put on such an event. Help Lesotho Board Chair, Jennifer Parr and her son Scott arrive Tuesday. Sandra and Paul Hellyer arrive Thursday. Friday, Josie Goodbody, Mr. Graff's communication person arrives with three film makers to make a documentary. It will be on Lesotho radio, TV and newspapers. Mr. Graff will fly in for the day. Tents are on loan from the government to shelter guests from the sun. We are borrowing a small stage. A local band will play at intervals. The St. Mary's girls will present a song. The little Basotho Leader Corps girls will lead the national anthem. The grannies are preparing a song and dance. A local priest will give the opening prayer and a youth will provide a short closing prayer. The latter is quite revolutionary and one of our initiatives to show the community that youth can play important roles.

Our staff is proud of this work and will each take part in meaningful ways. We all have weekly meetings to plan the opening. Last week, it was hysterical. The two most contentious items on the agenda were the opening and closing prayer (mandatory here) and the food. The staff debated these for a long time. There was disagreement as to whether the community would accept a youth taking the prayer leadership. There was debate about the most appropriate foods to serve the dignitaries and guests. I will never forget it - I was in stitches. There will be a small table to provide some traditional foods for the guests to sample in traditional bowls etc. We had to decide to give guests meal tickets to prevent many hungry children and adults from taking second and third helpings. The protocol is comparable to that for the King's visit in Canada. I have decided if my day job fails me, I could go into construction or event management!!!!

At her request, this week, I shall go down to Maseru to meet with the Prime Minister's Wife. It would be wonderful if the First Lady was able to help us in some meaningful way.

In all this we have all our regular services and programs to provide. On Friday, there will be a Grandmother Day in Hlotse to welcome our international guests. It will be a busy week.

This letter is short as I wanted to include a number of photos and let you all know that you are in our thoughts. We appreciate each person who has raised funds, encouraged us and believed in this project for the past three years. It is an enormous undertaking and will all be worth it in the final analysis. Thank you to each one for your prayers, good wishes and contributions.

I know that everyone has been enthralled with the Olympics (my mother sends me the medal results daily). It is a far cry from our work here. Canada has done well.

Please hold us in your thoughts this week and especially on Saturday. By the time you get up, it will all be over!

Winter-Spring 2010 – Letter #5

My greetings to you all,

What a time we have had!!! The week leading up to the Hlotse support centre opening was unbelievably busy and stressful, but we got through it as a strong and positive team. The Hellyers, Jennifer Parr and her son, Scott, arrived with luggage intact (always a blessing and certainly not ever to be taken for granted). Their presence was such a blessing – one of comfort and support. It was wonderful to share this time with them, even the difficult parts. We all very much appreciated their enthusiasm and understanding; it meant a lot to me personally and to our staff. The Hellyers were so good about the support centre being in such a sad state. We were washing walls until 20 minutes before it started. Sandra simply rolled up her sleeves for two days to sweep, wash walls and do whatever she could to help.

As you may know, accommodation here is difficult to find. At the last minute the Hellyers stayed at the guest house of the Sisters of Charity – and what a trial that was. Other than for a few short moments, they had no water, and they had difficulty accessing the facilities, trouble getting past the gate at night, etc. Both Sandra and Paul were amazing – positive, flexible and resourceful. What troupers!

Jennifer and Scott stayed at the Anglican convent guest house and were fine.

To set the stage, our current office consists of a few small rooms that are now so overcrowded we can hardly navigate and which necessitates holding meetings outside and even on the lawn. For such a small program team to put on an event of this size was a Herculean task. We borrowed pots for cooking from the Sisters of Charity; chairs, tables and tents from the government to shelter our guests from the sun; and a small stage from

the technical school. To say we were scrounging would not be an exaggeration. The tents were decorated so beautifully. In the end, we fed more than 900 people!!!! The food was delicious and everyone was delighted.

Our staff spent weeks preparing decorations for various rooms. Forty children in each of our primary schools traced, cut out and decorated their wee paper hands, each school did a poster on what Help Lesotho meant to them, the girls who will be in the hostel wrote out their goal for the year, former calendar shots and activity photos were laminated, balloons and bows were at the ready. We did not know until the eleventh hour which rooms would be presentable. In the end, and disappointingly, there were only three rooms suitable to be decorated. We hung our beautiful new African-print curtains in the three rooms. We were running on adrenalin, working late to clean and decorate. Grannies came to sweep and cook.

What an event this was!!!! We were all very touched. Representatives of each of our schools attended. Each primary school principal came – those from Thaba Tseka came the day before and helped clean up the property. The schools brought handmade gifts. The Thaba Tseka group even took up a modest collection to contribute. The Sisters of Charity gave us beautiful gifts. Local partners and dignitaries came from Maseru and our three districts – at their own expense and on their own time. Sponsored children came from afar. All difficulties aside, the love that exists among all the people in the Help Lesotho family here and which was so palpable would have made you so proud! This is perhaps the greatest testimony to our work.

The ceremony itself ran perfectly, like a well-oiled machine, on time and fluidly. The centre's benefactor, Mr. Graff, arrived in a helicopter at an old grass airfield not too far from the venue. I picked him up and discussed the fact that the building was not at all as complete as we had hoped for. He was very gracious and accommodating. I liked him. We drove to the site and waited a few minutes for His Majesty to arrive. I took them, members of parliament, important chiefs and other dignitaries on a tour of the property. We stopped and admired the children's artwork, a display of the grannies' crafts, the library and children's corner. To really visualize this, imagine concrete floors, only some windows installed, no doors, not one thing fully finished. The landscapers had worked tirelessly to lay sod and make the outside presentable and less like a construction site. The walkway was worked on until 30 minutes before King Letsie III arrived. There were only two outhouses for 900 people. Because the floors and roof are not complete on the upper story, the ceilings were leaking from recent rain onto our beautiful decorations and tables. If it hadn't been so tense, it might have been hysterical.

We consciously did not talk about our child sponsorship, youth or granny programs, as they are all full and we cannot accommodate more. The focus was on the leadership side of our work and the literacy, leadership and learning opportunities in the new centre.

The speeches—a short one each from a granny, a youth, a girl and a principal—were thoughtful and well received. Sr. Alice, the District Administrator, Ntate Ponya, 'M'e Mojaje and Jennifer Parr gave lovely speeches. Our youth led tours. Our young girls and grannies danced and sang. The king's speech was the most personal I have heard him make. As ever, he was eloquent and spoke extemporaneously. He praised Help Lesotho for its hard work and vision in knowing how much Lesotho needs young leaders. He spoke of the wonderful people he met in Canada and sent his greetings to them. He told our donors and beneficiaries how much this centre would mean to his people. He called on the assembly to frequent the centre and its programs, to help us in the difficult work we do and to protect the buildings as their own. His Majesty was gracious and supportive in every way. I promised to keep him apprised of the progress and to take him to the centre again when I return to

Lesotho. His level of knowledge of Help Lesotho is now such that he was comforting and assuring me!!!! Bless his heart.

The ribbon cutting was special. The Hellyers and King Letsie III cut the beautiful ribbon Joan Gregorich had sent on the gate to the support centre. His Majesty and Mr. Graff cut the ribbon on the gate to the Graff Leadership Centre.

Mr. Graff was lovely to have with us. He fully participated in each and every part and had great fun with the participants. He stayed longer than he expected and left with handmade items from the Leribe Craft Centre and the grannies. People liked him very much and enjoyed his speech. I was glad that he and I had some time to talk and that he understood the challenges of construction in rural Lesotho.

Following the ceremony, feast and visit with many people, the king left. Mr. Graff stayed and had great fun talking to the Basotho Girls Leader Corps, the Help Lesotho Leader Corp Youth and others.

After returning Mr. Graff to the airfield, we started on the clean up. All the plastic tables had to be dismantled, chairs stacked to deliver to the various owners, curtains taken down, books taken from the bookshelves to be re-boxed, children's art taken down and preserved. Each member of the staff worked about 14 hours that day, not to mention until late the previous night. This was the culmination of weeks of work, planning, revising and accommodating. I thought it would kill me. None of us were sleeping and the pressure was immense. The Hellyers graciously took us all out for dinner afterward to truly celebrate a wonderful day.

In the end, it could not have been nicer. The weather was perfect, the spirit loving, good will was flowing and the key point of celebrating the people of Lesotho was accomplished. Everything went perfectly and the issues behind the scenes were nowhere evident!!! Another tribute to our staff! The community could not have been happier or felt more honoured.

The next day I took Josie Goodbody, Mr. Graff's assistant and our advocate, and the Hellyers out into the country and to Pitseng to see the sights and to go on a tour as well.

Needless to say, we are all totally exhausted. Today, as I write, it is Moshoeshoe Day to celebrate the founder of Lesotho and a national holiday. We have given tomorrow off so that the staff has a four-day weekend to recover.

The state of the buildings is a worry and so I have delayed my departure from Lesotho for another two weeks. I am missing my children, family and friends. It has been a long haul. I will do everything in my power to move this forward while I am here. The project is over budget and we are working on that as well. Sr. Alice told me this week that this is the norm in Lesotho and these frustrations are unavoidable – I appreciate the encouragement but we are responsible and must bring this to its conclusion as quickly as possible. We must put our disappointment aside and press on now. I am on it and will be relentless until it is fully complete.

In all this, I want to mention the incredible support you, our donors, have given us. You have been encouraging and understanding. I thank each and every one who wrote to spur us on, who prayed for us, who offered us support and were thinking of us. Thank you sincerely for this.

As I said in my speech – our leadership motto is LEADERS NEVER GIVE UP!!!! This construction project is a perfect example of bringing joy and progress out of difficulty!

The saga continues....

Salang hantle.

Peg

PS: A special thank you to all those who sent supplies and a great big thank you to those who responded to my request for educational DVDs. They are just perfect – about animals, nature, Veggie tales, IMAX movies about gorillas, space, deep seas, and others. The harmonicas will be a delight to our centres and children. There was wrapping paper, stationary, pencils, toothbrushes and toothpaste for our hygiene classes, five chess sets for the out-of-school youth, shoes and even a couple of snow suits!

Winter-Spring 2010 – Letter #6

This is my last letter from Lesotho during this visit.

The days are noticeably shortening now. Autumn is descending; mornings and evenings are cool. The rains appear to have stopped and the skies have those wonderful late summer colours. Although most days remain hot, it is comparable to early October in Canada and the same comments are emerging about the impending cold weather. In the six years I have been coming to Lesotho, this has been the one with the most constant precipitation. The crops will be good. Cosmos flowers are resplendent in the fields – up to my shoulders – boasting pinks and purples throughout the slopes of the mountains. It is a sight to behold! The fields are growing to harvest and are filled with magnificent butterflies, locusts and grasshoppers to remind one of the Pharaoh story of the locusts!

Construction at Hlotse Centre continues well now that the pressure of the centre opening is over. The roof rafters are almost complete. Once the roof is on, the interior work can proceed quickly. My early morning visits are a nuisance to the construction crew I am sure. The staff and I all wait anxiously, with baited breath, for its completion and a place to work. We are so crowded in our current office that it is difficult to function now.

At Pitseng Centre this past Saturday, we hosted a wonderful, happy and highly successful educational gathering of more than 500 people. All ages were welcomed. We had two old men on canes, tiny wee ones and all ages in between, including mothers and babies. Our event partner, Kick4Life, engaged the children in games about communication, HIV/AIDS and the like. Adults attended sessions in the *lapa* (a thatched, open hut) on planned parenthood, healthy relationships and other relevant topics. Under the guidance of Ntate Ponya, 'M'e Maseretse and Gillian Walker, everything went so well. It was a joy to see so many people engaged in fun ways to learn and gather information and strategies for such important topics. Jennifer and Scott were able to participate and revel in the work that is being done.

Our grandmother sessions this month have focused on the plan for the next six months' transition from the first group of 200 to the second. It is a testimony to them as individuals and groups that they are so willing to hand these blessings to a new group of grannies who are now in much more need than they are.

The Basotho Girls Leader Corps of young 13- to 14-year-old girls is going well. They are focusing on their school work and trainings with 'M'e Ntea. They are living with the last of the St. Mary's girls now in our temporary accommodation until the hostel is finished. We are working on the mentorship of the older girls for the younger ones. The community volunteering is progressing. The young ones are growing so tall and confident now that they have better nutrition and support.

When reading all the student and adult camp evaluations, one comment struck me to the core: "About camp. We do not want to leave the place. We are not in a hurry to go home because we are not babysitting or owning the families. Being here at camp we are releasing some of the problems we meet at home."

The staff has been preparing materials for me to take home. 'M'e Mampaka is struggling to get the child sponsorship updates – always a challenge at such distances. 'M'e Ikaneng has been working hard on the final receipts and materials ready for the audit at the end of the month. The youth leaders are striving to take on responsibility and learn to reach more youth. The local chiefs are supportive. The Help Lesotho Advisory Committee of community leaders is committed to more fully engaging the community, especially the business community, to help us.

This has been an incredibly busy time. I imagine how much life will improve and operations progress when we have this new place to work, room to move around in and in which to interview clients, a real place to hold our activities. The staff has been patient and flexible – they work so hard. Each one is devoted to his/her effort to make a difference in the thousands of people we serve.

Back to Canada! Our donations are down, probably because of the situation in Haiti and other national disasters. Lots of work to do!

In all this, we never forget the generosity of those who are faithfully supporting us. Without your help none of this would be possible. On behalf of our Basotho and Canadian staff, please accept our thanks and know that you are as important as any portion of this effort. As we move into our second five years, thousands more will be helped – because of you!!!!

I am excited to be going home after such a long time and look forward to seeing as many of you as possible and as geography will allow.

Fall 2010 – Letter #1

It is exactly six years since my first visit to Lesotho. It has been and continues to be a remarkable journey.

My fingers are cold as I write. I have two scarves wrapped around my neck. I wear two sweaters and a blanket around my waist like the Basotho women. I have two scarves and a blanket. Many do not. The cold comes up through the concrete floor and seeps through my heavy socks and slippers. My eyes are smarting from the smoke and under my finger nails is the coal from lighting my little coal burning stove. It is dirty work but I have a stove, most do not. The night wind whips around the cottage where I stay. I am safe and protected. This is not the case for many. My light bulb is inadequate for me to read at night, but I have electricity most times and

others do not. I have an indoor toilet. One is never confused at the degree of suffering or inconvenience here. I think of our children and grannies sleeping on the ground in the cold and in the dark. Most have no candles or coal or paraffin fires in their unventilated huts. One old 'M'e shared that the smoke is often so dense in her hut that she cannot open her eyes.

It is mid-winter in Lesotho. From 5PM to 10AM it is so cold. One often goes to bed at 7 or 8 to escape. The mid-day is lovely though now – sunny and often warm. It is not as harsh a winter as some. How the Basotho hate the cold!

The day I arrived was a grandmother day for the 50 new grannies in the Hlotse group. As I met them for the first time and looked into their worn faces, I was filled with excitement that I would have one more chance to watch 200 grandmothers grow in health, resiliency and knowledge to do better. They are chosen by the chiefs and are the beaten down saviours of Lesotho. It will take two years but we will raise them up. I note for the glimmers of hope in their cataract-filled eyes.

Just after I arrived, a tall, thin young man I well remembered came to the office. He waited for over an hour to see me. He was adorable. He shyly said that without our help, he would have had nothing. He would never have been able to finish high school or even grow up. He believes he would have starved. He was thanking me in place of his sponsor - that we found him and helped him. He has just finished his first year of university! He is doing well and so wants me and his sponsor to know that he appreciates Help Lesotho and her support more than he can express. This handsome young man was on the verge of tears in his appreciation. He went to so much trouble to come and express his appreciation.

The days are busy. I am primarily here to finish the centre in Hlotse. It is really coming and will be wonderful but there are still issues to resolve with the construction. I had so hoped we could move in while I am here but it seems doubtful. We all yearn to be past this stage and get on with the business at hand. Our office is so crowded. I marvel that work still gets done. We virtually trip over each other. With the cords from the space heaters in the mix, coming to work has become a dangerous challenge to navigate a room!!!

Thabo, who has been in our three month youth training for two months, has now been accepted to the police training program. This is his chance for a job and he cannot turn it down. He was so torn to leave the program. He had difficulty looking me in the eye but his message was clear and confident. This training had changed his life! He now understood that he had been engaging in risky behaviour and making poor choices. He now realizes that he has good qualities and can indeed be a young leader in his community. He feels Help Lesotho is his family and that he would always be a part of this it and pledges to return to help change his village and his country. While he talked, I was filled with gratitude that perhaps this young man – so full of resolve and appreciation - would make a good and honest policeman; that he would carry this feeling of self-worth and community responsibility with him in the execution of his new duties. I felt relief – one good policeman is worth a lot in this country. One fine young man to protect those who have no one else! It was a good day!!!

In the middle of a busy day, I looked out on the grass in our yard. It was filled with spring lambs and ewes grazing. It would be too early for babies in our climate but here they were – fuzzy and adorable; tiny and friendly. You have to smile!

On Sunday, I met with Refiloe, a young woman we sponsored through high school. She was not lucky enough to have her own sponsor but was funded through our Education Fund, a fund a few donors help with. After finishing high school, she completed the three month training to become a Help Lesotho Youth Leader and worked in the Pitseng Centre with the youth club, the library and the other programs. She is a beautiful young woman, smart, articulate and devoted to Help Lesotho. She has just finished her first month at university – a new university in Maseru which now provides an alternative to the National University in Roma. She is one of our star graduates. Help Lesotho is her mother. An orphan who lives with five other children and her grandmother, she is clear that she would never have had a chance to a future without Help Lesotho. We all love her. She promised to do well at her business studies. Her dream is to return to her village and become a Help Lesotho staff. Amid this wonderful visit hung the reality that this new university requires each student to have a laptop, which costs almost CAD\$900 here. This is impossible. She gets a student loan for her fees and lodging but could never scrounge this amount in a million years. This is not something we can provide. When I hugged her good bye, she expressed her faith that there would indeed be a way and that she would somehow manage. I wondered how. Our leadership theme, ‘Leaders never give up!’ rung in my heart. I am so proud of her.

I am cold. I think of the heat at home. The mountain of blankets on my bed beckon to me.

Another week beings! There are many challenges but I it is my hope that this year we can help more children and youth. It is why I am here. Our Basotho staff is amazing and they never give up either!

We will make it a good week.

Fall 2010 – Letter #2

Greetings from chilly Lesotho,

The fat pig who resides beside me is squealing; the roosters are making even more noise. My water pipes are frozen. The disabled women who live on this property fill their jugs from the communal water tap outside my window. There has been almost no precipitation this winter; the fields are arid and rip for the erosion of the fierce August winds. It does not bode well for spring planting. Young girls walk home from school through the fields. It has been colder the past couple of weeks. Our office is freezing as the cold seeps up through the concrete floor. I sincerely hope that the power is on tomorrow to complete many of the things that need to be done.

This has been a good week on the program side. I had a chance to facilitate a couple of the sessions with the new group of youth in training. What fine young people. Each is bursting to describe how this training has changed their life. As I read their weekly reflection assignments and see how they are indeed struggling with key issues of power imbalances, the way women and men should treat each other, the consequences of risky behaviour, I can’t help feeling both touched and proud of them. To see them make such leaps of thinking and gain confidence in who they are and what they can become is a great joy and a main reason we are here.



I spent a day at Pitseng Centre to participate in a grandmother day. This was the last day for the first group of grannies. Their time is up in the program. During their nutritious lunch, I watched one sweet old woman carefully wrap her two oranges. I imagined she was taking them home to share with her orphans. Last week, I met the new group. The difference is remarkable. It is a visual representation of change. The new ones are frail and hesitant; unused to such support and kindness. They receive help to fill out the forms for their old page pension (about \$40 per month). We ensure they know their legal rights. The old ones

are confident and open. Their progress has been more than we could have hoped. It was the day for their final food parcels from the **Food Gifts for Grandmothers** Program. Because of the generosity of the donors to that program, 400 grandmothers and hundreds of orphans will get food parcels this winter. It is a huge task to organize. Each grandmother receives mealie meal (corn meal for papa), beans, split peas, paraffin, cooking oil, matches, sugar, tea, soap and salt.

I had a great visit with my dear friend and former student at the University of Ottawa, Sister Alice, for whom I continue to hold accountable for Help Lesotho! She is now the principal of Pitseng High School at which we sponsor roughly 100 students. It is always wonderful to see her. Sister Alice is an active member of the Help Lesotho local Advisory committee and continues to support our work in any ways she can.



I met with the elders of Raphoka Anglican Church across from the Pitseng Centre. Because of the generosity of Holy Trinity Church in North Gower, ON, they are fixing up the leaky, fragile roof on the church. It is an important place of support and gathering for the community. The building is ancient and falling apart so this will give it new life.

Pontmain Primary is getting a concrete pad to cover the horrible area where they hold outside assemblies each morning. The children will no longer have to stand in the mud and have a dry place to play because of the generosity of Hopewell Elementary and a donor.

My time with the young girls in the Basotho Girls Leader Corps was such fun. The first group are now in grade eight; the second group in grade seven. They are adorable and so proud to be chosen to be young leaders in their communities. They love their training sessions and are maturing in delightful ways. One tiny wee girl I have known since she was in grade two is the top student in the whole group. We have made a huge commitment to these young girls in the conviction that creating a significant number of girls from two areas will infuse the villages with strong peer role models, knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS, gender equity and good decision making. We hold great hopes for them.

Four staff spent this week in Thaba Tseka to visit the schools, grandmothers and children there. Much higher in the mountains, it is painfully cold. I look forward to hearing how things went. I will not have time to travel to many places this visit as my primary goal is to get the Hlotse centre ready for moving in. This has been a herculean project. Construction is always difficult in any country but here, so far from major stores and skill workforce, it has been a long and arduous process. It is getting close to completion and we have made significant progress this month. My next letter, I will tell you all about it.

I am always mixed in my reactions here. Due of the faithful generosity of our donors, huge changes and support are being constantly provided to hundreds of people. Due to the persistent effects of AIDS and poverty, the need is never ending. The yin and yang of development!

Every day, I watch our staff struggle with insurmountable odds – with courage and commitment. They are an inspiration to everyone who comes here – always kind and compassionate, productive and effective. I have lost track of how many trips I have made, how many months spent in Lesotho. Who could ever have imagined that Help Lesotho could have grown so much, reached so many thousands of people, and changed so many lives? It is a miracle really. The confidence of our donors that we use their funds to make such a difference is a trust we hold dear and a privilege to be part of.

I wish you all a wonderful summer time. Enjoy the heat!

Fall 2010 – Letter #3

Lumelang – a special greeting to you all,

As I pack to leave Lesotho – yet again, I have not accomplished all that I set out to do, mainly seeing the completion of the Hlotse Seotlong Centre. Seotlong means *'a place to share ideas'* in Sesotho.

For those who have lost track or are new to the Help Lesotho family, I am including some history with photos below on this important juncture in our development.



More than 3.5 years ago, Carolyn Kennedy Vanderheide and I sat for hours on my living room floor as I sketched out future plans on a roll of newsprint; plans that included two centres to increase our work with youth, grannies and orphans. Volunteer architect, Deirdre Ellis, put these ideas on paper. The vision was clear; the need compelling; and our board supportive. We set out to manifest these places of hope and education.

The Seotlong Centre Pitseng, fully funded by the Ontario English Teachers Association of Ottawa, opened on donated land in June, 2008. It is a huge success and a life-line to thousands of villagers around Pitseng. Words are inadequate to describe how important this centre is in the community.

Our tiny office is totally inadequate for the staff and hundreds of participants in our programs. An exhaustive search confirmed that no suitable place to rent or buy was to be had. We would have to build! The Seotlong Centre Hlotse became our focus. Fundraising began immediately as did the search for land in the Hlotse area. Obtaining land in Lesotho is a mystical experience, illusive and more difficult that you can imagine. With all

determination, we proceeded with these parallel paths in faith that one day they would converge. We will forever be grateful for the people who believed in this vision and began to contribute.

There were to be two buildings, now called the Graff Leadership Centre and the Support Centre. The former is a facility to train and educate large numbers plus a hostel for a girls' leadership program. The latter is a space from which to do our rural programs for grandmothers, orphans and schools. These program foci are quite separate and require different facilities. After months of searching and discussions, the local government donated a beautiful piece of land. Al Garrett of Lakeside Church, Guelph; St. Georges-on-the-Hill Anglican Church, Mississauga; Jennifer Parr, George Vanee, Sandra and Paul Hellyer; Viking School, Alberta; Colonel By High School Ottawa; to mention a few came forward to raise funds. Donations came from individuals, groups and churches – each important and one more step to reach the goal. We built a relationship with the Facet Foundation, UK that made it possible in the end.

In the development of human beings, one must justify that funds spent on structures are better used than on more short-term benefits for individuals. We had reached an impasse. Our work was constrained by space. These centres will last for decades and allow us to reach additional thousands in far more sustainable ways.

So, here we are in August 2010 – so close! We chose a largely maintenance-free structural approach which will last longer and be more efficient in the long run. Every deadline for completion has come and gone and the project is over-budget. We had the grand opening in March as it was already planned many months ahead. King Letsie III, Mr. Graff, the Hellyers and Jennifer Parr made it special. But it was not ready to open!

I had hoped to move in while in Lesotho this time. It was not to be. For those who have been involved in construction, you will empathize with the challenges. There some key issues need to be resolved. The floors on both levels of the Graff Leadership Centre are so poorly done they are being taken up and completely be re-laid, at the expense of the contractor. The front door openings are an irregular size for some reason and need special frames. We have had trouble getting various building materials – and then delivery in northern Lesotho. Personal trips are required to various towns in South Africa or the 1.5 hour trip to the capital, Maseru, for this piece or that; to find a skilled craftsman who can accomplish a certain task. Nothing is easy and we have had more than our share of challenges, as most of you know. 'M'e Ikaneng Taole, Director of Finance and Operations, has spent untold hours tracking down each and every receipt from the contractor. I will not regale you with the endless frustrations and issues.

On the positive side: the company contracted is local; the project has provided jobs for many Basotho; all possible goods and materials have been purchased locally to support the local economy; and no internationals have worked on the project. The local chief and government officials, as well as Help Lesotho's local Advisory Committee are huge advocates who patiently wait for its completion – this place that will make Hlotse famous and provide an undreamed of resource to support the community.

While we wait, we run programs in any place we can find – continuing to reach hundreds of youth, orphans and grandmothers. It is just more difficult. The Basotho Girls Leadership Corps is doing well. The girls are housed in temporary accommodation and being trained as planned. The staff continues to work in their crowded rooms with good spirits and total belief in the benefits that the people we serve will get soon. I am so proud of them.

Our thanks especially go to the donors who believe in this dream, to the Board of Directors for their faith in it and to those who wait patiently during the final weeks of construction. Special thanks go to the Facet Foundation – they have been patient, supportive and generous. Our investment is in the future – of our programming and in the country. We will indeed move in soon to make you all proud to be a part of this venture!

To the right – our virgin land!!!! Photo February 2009



A new beginning! September 15, 2009



This is the Graff Leadership Centre. The hostel for the Basotho Girls Leadership Corps is on the upper floor.

The property is large with three magnificent trees – this one in the centre and one on each side. Every effort has been made to preserve the trees (I am known as the “tree police”!)

The concrete pad in front is the conservancy tank. Rather than allow sewage to go into the shallow water table, it goes into this tank which will be pumped out 2 x a year.



'M'e Ikaneng stands in the industrial kitchen in the Graff Leadership Centre. We feed hundreds of people and are grateful for these pre-cut press board cupboards and room to move! The 50 girls living above will be fed from this kitchen as well.

All materials choices were for the least expensive possible. We have secured discounts from 5-10% on goods purchased, depending on the store.

This is the Support Centre, waiting for the materials to close in the roof.



The winter brown does not show the property to its full beauty. The Graff Leadership Centre will be ready first. We will move into it and then into the Support Centre once it is finished.



The Graff Leadership Centre – straight on, the Support Centre to the left.

One of two 'lappas' is in the foreground, an open air hut for youth discussion, children's story times and training sessions and additional meeting rooms for various groups.

The rocks in front will be used to build a keyhole garden for vegetables as a demonstration to villagers of how to build one. In addition, there will be a 1.5 metre x 50 metre garden along the front fence to use the land wisely, ensure the girls learn to garden and grow food to contribute to the costs.



This concrete play pad at the lower right of the property will be painted with various games for the children once the weather warms up. Funds for this were raised by 17-year-old Scott Giacomini.



The Graff Leadership Centre from the front path. This shows the fabulous tree and gives an idea of the size of the building. There is a large plenary room inside, a wonderful library, kitchen, only two offices and session/meeting rooms etc.

Local organizations or civil society groups (such as those living with AIDS) may use a meeting room free of charge. Local partners will be invited to meet to explore ways to work together to help the community.

I sincerely hope that these photos, taken just a few days ago, help you to visualize both the challenges of such a large project and the spectacular potential that lies ahead to make a transformative difference in the lives of those we serve. It has been an enormous undertaking and will continue to be until it is entirely complete. We have done our very best to move it along and to ensure that the funds donated go to build solid, environmentally-responsible and useful space for our work for the next decades to come.

Thank you for walking this journey with us, for your patience and for your belief that all this was possible.

Rea leboha haholo (we thank you very much)

Peg

PS if I lose my day job, I have decided not to become a construction supervisor!!!!