



2011

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Winter-Spring 2011 - Letter #1

Slipping into Lesotho is as if I never left. Time is different here and there is a seductive rhythm to the days. Yesterday was the first time we have had three consecutive days without rain since arriving. 2011 here has continued the torrential rains now into the third month – unprecedented in the memory of many villagers. Roads run as rivers. Ruts are tire-deep in some places. Huts are submerged or disintegrate under the pressure of the constant pounding. Crops have washed away or remain unplanted. We have needed a four-wheel drive just to get into the place where we stay. Near there, bodies rose to the surface in a flooded graveyard - those previously laid to rest by loved ones who could only afford blankets as caskets. Yet, we all know that one day it will stop and the ground will dry like cement. Each day of sunshine allows the water to ebb. Although rain (*pula in Sesotho*) is yearned for – this has been too much for many.



It has been predictably busy since arriving on New Year's Eve Day. Suzanne Boileau, our new Director of Programs, is here for the first time to understand our programs and beneficiaries. Helen Douglas comes for the third time as a volunteer and now a Board member. Lucy van Oldenbarneveld, Ottawa CBC news celebrity, came to join

the camp and see our work. Rick Mommersteeg, from London, came to help get the centre finished.

Once settled, we fit ourselves into the already well organized camp preparations with our annual slogan of Leaders Never Give Up! These six days of camp remain a life-transforming experience each year for 230 orphans, youth and teachers from our 15 schools. This was the first time in six years that we had water in the washrooms throughout – a real blessing. A large tent mostly sheltered us from the torrents of rain. It rained everyday and most nights. Evening talent shows were put on with the light of one or two flashlights under the tent canopy. One storm ripped the poles right out of the ground.

Each session was carefully prepared for the age group and topic. Staff practiced facilitation. Lucy gave sessions on creative/therapeutic writing and ‘using words to heal’ to rave reviews. Helen toiled tirelessly in the kitchen and dish washing room. Each night as I went to the rooms to sing with the children and chat about their day, they praised the food and the blessing of being there. Ah the food – so carefully planned to provide the maximum nutrition for the money. Most of these children would never have three meals a day, let alone protein or an apple or biscuit between meals. Before going to bed, they delight in their small packet of nuts and raisins. Camp evaluation forms are filled with comments about food – beyond their dreams.

For some campers who will graduate out of our system, this was their last camp to their chagrin and made it even more precious. They all want to stay forever! Faithful support for this camp has made life truly better for more than 1300 children to date. My mother alone has sponsored 45 children to camp over the years!

It takes a huge effort to get everything ready. Joan Gregorich packs the suitcases with great care with the wonderful craft supplies donated from our list by the generous and faithful members of the Kingston Grandmother Connection and others from St. George’s Church in Ottawa. How the children loved the novelty of brightly coloured materials, sparkles and stickers! Suzanne was the undisputed craft queen! Lucy was the macramé bracelet specialist. Boys and girls alike delighted in producing special mementos to take home.

As ever, those moments sitting on a step with a child break my heart. I held the shoulders of a young woman to hear how her father abuses her – how she leaves home at 5 AM just before he gets up and arrives late after he has gone to the bar. He hates her for going to school and diminishes her every effort. My eyes fill with wet admiration at her determination to get an education. Her mother died in 1998. Her father refused to send her to school as a child and when free primary education came into Lesotho in 2000, she just went on her own anyway and has suffered his abuse ever since. She is 25 now and recently failed grade 11 for the first time in this long journey because the problems at home were more than she could bear. She was mortified to be held back yet one more year but her determination is no less. How can a girl study with no place, light, desk or safety? Her sponsor will be so proud of her regardless. Not once has a sponsor turned from a child when they fail, understanding that grief, lack of nutrition, home responsibilities in the fields, with animals or looking after the sick can make it nigh impossible to study or sometimes even go to school. How does one convey to children at home how precious an education is?

I was struck again this year at the quality of our youth leaders and the many fine sponsored boys. All the children take turns washing dishes, cleaning etc and nary a whimper. Each works hard and gladly - happy to participate in such a positive place. Our local partners play games and sports based around HIV/AIDS education with the children in the afternoons. Teachers learn new strategies and share ideas. Our staff was outstanding. The camp ran as clockwork thanks to the wonderful organization of 'M'e Mamozi. Our two Canadian interns (read their blog <http://internsinlesotho.blogspot.com>), Alison McDonald and Tara Doolan, worked tirelessly behind the scenes to keep the administrative part running. Camp was again a great success and precious blessing!



My key focus this month is to get the centre finished! As in any large project, there are a million details to complete and items to purchase. For example, if we need 35 wall hooks, a local shop will have 8 and the search for the remainder is painstaking and often unproductive. A 25 mm x 20 mm plasjon plumbing couplar will be impossible to find. They give me the wrong dimension of rebar. This is the case with each and every item we require. There are only a couple of shops here and then the search must widen to Ficksburg, South Africa or Maseru. There are few options and fewer choices. Despite endless planning and effort,

hours are wasted finding materials – albeit plumbing, electrical fittings, housekeeping or carpentry. Cajoling trades people to come and finish makes me feel like a police woman. The chap making the stairs has been absent for weeks and the stairs are a mess, as one example. He is furious at me now because I called his boss twice. There are few two-story buildings here and local carpenters have little experience with angle, tread width or rail detail. Rick has been a huge help, working constantly and efficiently with me to put up curtain rods, toilet paper holders, hooks, make steps to the outhouses (called pit latrines here), etc.

Camp is over for another year. School is starting all through the mountains. The sun continues to rise in the east. In the coming weeks, we will visit the schools and projects and the centre will get completed this month. We will continue to serve these grandmothers and orphans. We will help more children and develop more youth leaders. We too will be determined! With your help and support, we will succeed! **Leaders never give up!!!!**

Best wishes for the New Year from Lesotho!

Winter-Spring 2011 – Letter #2

Khotsong,

Irony is alive in Lesotho. Last week the rains were beyond imagination. Torrents falling from the skies! From the window we watched our precious soil cascading down the hill; erosion before our eyes. Many say there have not seen such rains in 25 years. Bridges are down, huts have crumbled. The irony is that we have no water. Suzanne and I have moved. In our previous place we went without water for two to four days a week. Now we are in our third day here. Maseru, Lesotho's capital city has had no water for a week. A truck full of empty barrels came yesterday to take our water. Over 40 people are living at the centre now, and that is a lot of people with only the water tanks which catch water from the roof. As the King of Siam would say, it is puzzlement!

I held a focus group with the granny leads at the 2011 leadership camp, and the comments brought me to tears. So much good comes from that program in ways one would never expect. I think of the grannies, and of the thatched roofs on their huts, every day and night as the heavens open and the deluge begins afresh. The new group of grannies has had no repairs on their huts yet, and some of their huts have fallen apart, usually those made of mud. Others have had wet floors for two months. Where will they sleep?

We have had five hot and sunny days since, which have refreshed our spirits. There has been too much rain but again ironically, each time it stops everyone fears it will not rain again.



On January 24, 2011 we moved our office and centre in to the Seotlong Centre, Hlotse! This day will go down as a major turning point. It has taken four years of blood, sweat and, I confess, some tears. Our old office has grown even smaller and more packed, and staff can hardly move. With the amount of rain, the dampness has soaked through the floors and mildew has grown on most of our things. The grass out front is a lake after the rains. There is running, open sewage just beyond the trees. We leave at a good time.

The buildings at Seotlong Centre are almost finished. There are some windows to adjust, doors to fix, handles to put on, but the centre will be transformed in a week and become the home of our happy staff. Thousands of orphans and grandmothers will benefit. They will be received with respect with a place to come into from the cold and wet. There is a private room for them to pour out their stories; they no longer have to do so with so many people watching.



For the first time we have a home of our own! Of course it rained throughout the whole day, but nothing could dampen our spirits. We were all filthy from unpacking, moving furniture, cleaning rooms and working around the tradesmen. We clean a room, and they do something else that casts dust or worse all over. Other than Ikaneng's office, there are still four to six people per office, but it is dry and bright, and there is a place for everything. We have shelves and proper desks made of counter-tops. Every visitor and every staff is delirious about the space and the beauty of the buildings and the property.

Each day we think of every donor who has supported this vision. Each day we are thankful for people's patience. Without the funds and patience of the Facet Foundation, the Hellyers, St. Georges-on-the-Hill Anglican Church in Etobicoke, Lakeside Church Guelph, St. Mark's High School, Ottawa and many individual donors, this could not be possible. As we organize, unpack the previous library books and tidy the rooms, we imagine the thousands of people who will benefit. Our sincere thanks to each and every one for each prayer, each word of encouragement. It has been a long journey, and we are thankful to finally be here.

On January 11, the Basotho Girls Leadership Corps girls moved in and are well settled. They are such fine young women, aged 13–15 and in Forms A and B (Grades 8 and 9). I was bursting with satisfaction when I saw this girl, who was supposed to be polishing her shoes, sneaking some reading in her "cannot-put-it-down" book. In a non-literacy culture where few read for pleasure, this was a decided success. The girls are on a schedule all day, and reading is a big part. They are to help in the gardens, wash their own clothes and dishes, clean and contribute in many ways. We are



determined that they will not be spoiled and will retain or learn life skills and work habits that will sustain them. This weekend the girls helped me move crushed stones, gravel for some yard work and larger stones for keyhole gardens. They contribute willingly and are so happy to have this chance to go to school, to have access to books and be fed three times a day. It is beyond their families' dreams. One guardian told me yesterday that this was a miracle for her orphan and that the girl's life would be transformed. Students at Colonel-By High School in Ottawa made beautiful banners to welcome the girls to their new home.

I have the most wonderful news. The national examination results are out for Standard 7 (Grade 7), Form C (Grade 10) and Form E (Grade 11). Help Lesotho had one top ten student in Standard 7: Matekoa, son of our office manager, 'M'e Mahlompho! We had three of the ten students in Lesotho for Grade 12: Ntai (whose sponsor is Chuck Bridger), Bohlokoa (whose sponsors are Lesley and Dave Dunkerley) and Tholoana (whose sponsors are Naida Hyde and Helga Jacobson). To get in the top ten in the entire country is an enormous feat of perseverance (Leaders Never Give Up) and brilliance. This ensures the winners of government sponsorship to a good university in South Africa.

Ntai is 17 and from a child-headed household. He has been looking after his younger siblings for years. Without sponsorship he could NEVER have attended high school, let alone have achieved this remarkable accomplishment. He is such a fine young man and was recently chosen as one of our three Basotho youth interns for the period between high school and university, which lasts roughly six months. For the first time last week, Ntai walked up a set of stairs to the second story of a building. He is so eager to learn, and so many things are new to him. Coming from remote Thaba Tseka, this boy deserves every accolade possible.

Tholoana exemplifies the possibilities of sponsoring through the **Education Fund**. This fund allows us to choose extraordinary youth in their last year or two of high school who are academic and community stars but who cannot afford to get through the last milestone. Grade 12 in Lesotho has many extra fees, including exam fees, for instance, which are prohibitive. This gorgeous and talented young woman had government sponsorship but no food to eat. She was given food vouchers to allow her to finish her last two years of high school. Now look: she is in the top ten in the whole country. What if she had not been fed?

Bohlokoa is a quiet girl from a remote village who would never have been recognized. She has been sponsored throughout her entire high school career and was chosen by her primary school principal as having great potential and being in need of support. She has made it to this pinnacle with the help and love of her sponsor.

These successes, added to the transformation of the grandmothers and the development of each child and youth, make the staggering challenges and heartache of this work worthwhile. If we reflect on all we are accomplishing together, it is amazing! Thank you for walking this journey with us.

Letsatsi le monate (have a good day).

Winter-Spring 2011 - Letter #3

The rain has abated! We have several weekly torrents, but the relentless downpours have subsided in large part. It is a blessing to many of us, but there are various villages who have had no water in their village taps for two months and who have been depending on these rainfalls. We have water most days here, although not the last couple again, and we hope the water and electricity do not go out on the same days. As I write, we have neither.

Yesterday I watched a beautiful young mother with the sweetest baby on her back so carefully scooping water from a puddle. People are starting to ‘take’ water from others – wherever they can find it. When we have water in our outside tap, people sneak into the property to take some. We pay for this on the municipal supply. I went to buy a lock for the tap yesterday – what a moral dilemma to deny people water. Our tap has none now but we cannot have strangers coming into the property to get water with so many young girls living here. Each day we use less water to wash- fearful of when the supply will return. We fill buckets to have on reserve when there is water. There are forty people living at the centre now and the lack of water will become an ever increasing problem, regardless of how careful we are. We have three water tanks which catch water from the eaves. They will not last for long. We have two large elevated storage tanks connected to a well but we cannot get the chap to hook it up. I call his boss everyday at 8:15. Today I will try again!

Voice of America said yesterday: “... In Lesotho, it’s a bit vague but we think that probably between 20 and 40 percent of the planted area may be affected.”

The Food & Agriculture Organization said: “South Africa has already declared a national state of disaster in many districts of the country due to the floods.” Crop and land damage is estimated to be in the millions of dollars.

As we settle into our new home and unpack the wonderful educational games provided by members of the Kingston Grandmother Connection, students at Hillcrest High School in Ottawa, other school children and Anne Gardner, we anticipate the joy that so many children – and adults – will find in these brightly coloured, culturally appropriate and educational activities. The chess sets are poised for our tournaments. In a place where learning is arduous and often unhelpful, these will be such a blessing for years to come.

Final construction details are coming along, but there remains much to do. We are all trying our best.

Schools have been in session now for three weeks. ‘M’e Mampaka, Allison and Suzanne are doing the school visits. I go along as time allows. These visits are one of my favourite things to do, next to the Grandmother Days. At 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. – even earlier in the mountains – the children start walking to school. By the time they leave, they have fetched water for their “bucket” baths and every cell of their wee bodies is scrubbed. Some have had a morsel to eat, most not. For many, the noon meal at school of weak porridge and a few beans is the sole meal of the day.

We have been to Motati Primary School, twinned with Deep Cove Elementary on Vancouver Island, and Mokoena Primary, twinned with Rockcliffe Park Primary in Ottawa. Mokoena is virtually being rebuilt with funds from Rockcliffe Park – the mud and stone classrooms from the inside out, carefully so as not to have



them crumble in the repairs. Interior walls are being reinforced, new floors installed, and paint and exterior cement applied to cover the broken walls. New windows are replacing those previously stuffed with rocks and newspapers to keep out the cold. This is a miracle in progress and the children are delighted. They are receiving school supplies and new chalkboards.

This week it is Paray Primary, Sefapanong, Paray High School, Thaba Tseka High School and Katlehong Primary, all in Thaba Tseka. There was a grandmother day in Butha Buthe and this week one in Thaba Tseka – a joy to attend.

We have another graduate here this week volunteering in the library. Reabetsoe has been a sponsored child for years and has graduated from the International Baccalaureate program in Maseru and has been accepted to the University of Cape Town. As she awaits government sponsorship for her superb marks, she will stay active with us. We try so hard to help these keen students stay mentally challenged in the 6 – 18-month wait between high school and university. These are the ones who are blessed with enough marks to get the government loans. Reabetsoe is a marvellous young woman, sensible, down to earth, serious. She comes from an excellent, intact, albeit desperately poor family, a family which truly supports education and hard work. Her younger sister is also a sponsored child and hopefully will do as well.

One note to me this week reads: "I admired your consolation of my brother's illness because if we were not members of Help Lesotho maybe he might be died and I thanked you and Help Lesotho to give us a light to know our status for HIV/AIDS."

The stories are endless and the challenges profound. Each person is important, each grandmother and youth. I think of the District 15 schools in New Brunswick who have supported our education work for years. The children of District 15, under excellent leadership, raise funds for uniforms, shoes and school supplies to keep children in school. I admire their dedication enormously.

On a practical note, our staff here have been using donated computers, which are breaking down. We need five new computers at about \$750 here (\$3,750 in total) that need to be bought here for repairs, etc. If anyone knows how we can find donations for them, please let me know.

I will write again another time as my battery is almost gone. Night falls over the mountains the southern skies are resplendent with stars. Life goes on in Lesotho!

Letsatsi le monate (have a good day).

Winter-Spring 2011 – Letter #4

Lumelang,

Today is a glorious sunny day, after days of rain. One of our staff called it a ‘shining day’! We have water and electricity – which is much appreciated!

The estimation of the effects of the torrential rains include the Food and Agriculture Organization findings that in some flooded areas in Lesotho, "up to 60 percent of the harvest has been lost and more than 4,700 livestock, mainly sheep and goats, have died." The recent floods that swept across southern Africa are likely to contribute to food insecurity, increases in food prices, more cases of malaria, and leave governments and other stakeholders struggling to restore the situation to normal. In South Africa alone, the announcement by the Department of Social Development that it has already spent R20 million on flood relief and that another R20 million is still needed, indicates the extent of the damage caused by these floods.

Speaking of water, we visited Khethisa High School and the bath house project funded by St. Thomas Aquinas High School, Ottawa, and the Belleville Rotary Club. They have been raising funds for some time to provide a new bath house for over 300 girls in boarding. With few high schools in the mountains, girls who live too far to walk must go into boarding. It is important to have the water warmed in the frigid winter months. The Principal, Ntate Mokoabe, is a fine leader and to be commended for his dedication to provide a protected, discrete place for his girls to bath. As in any significant construction project, it takes seemingly infinite time to complete but it will be a blessing for decades to come.

Suzanne left Thursday after seven weeks. She was able to visit all our twinned schools and projects and has been ‘caught’ in our passion for our work here. She will be such a help on the Canadian side and worked tirelessly here to meet the beneficiaries and local leaders.

Everywhere I go I hear the same refrain from local staff, leaders and children – “M’e, there are so many deaths – so many funerals”. Church attendance is suffering as people spend most Saturdays at funeral services. Although there has been progress in the treatment for HIV/AIDS, opportunistic diseases continue to devastate families and villages.

Our programs continue to reach hundreds of youth. In one week, our Youth and Leadership Officer, 'M'e Maseretse addressed more than 600 students in our school ANTI AIDS clubs at St. Charles, Khethisa, Molapo, and Bokoro high schools with as many as 167 attending each session on goal setting for the new school year – which of course includes HIV/AIDS prevention information, motivation for study and messages . I asked 'M'e to tell us about the youth and their stories:

“A 15 years old girl, who looked worried and sad through the discussion at one school raised up a hand and said that she is born from a very poor family. Her mother died while she was 9 years old and her father deserted the family some years before then. She said that even though Help Lesotho is sponsoring her, it is so difficult to concentrate in class and at the same time think about what she and her young siblings are going to eat at night. She described it as so painful and unbearable to come to school with an empty stomach. When she sees her younger sister go to sleep without food, it is hard to concentrate and focus on her future. In tears she continued: “I always feel so ashamed and embarrassed to ask from others. I usually blame God for what he has done for me and my sisters and brothers. I wish I can die and be reborn in another family. I am so tired. I cannot take it anymore, because of this miserable life. I cannot even concentrate well in class, sometimes I feel like teachers are not treating me well because I am poor. I do not think I can achieve anything in life. I hate to live and I hate school, I wish my mum was there. Please 'M'e, tell me; what can I do? ”, she said sobbing.

The discussion turned to poverty so similar in the lives of most of the students. 'M'e confessed she was emotionally taken as well. She reassured them that it is not their fault they are poor. She encouraged them to believe they can deal with issues positively and improve their lives by working hard and passing well so they get educated and employed. She advised them to have faith and patience to believe that one day things will change.

After the discussion another girl said through her tears: “I always thought it was my fault and God is punishing my family. I had lost faith in myself, but after this session I feel relieved and alive again. I understand I should not dwell on things that I cannot change; instead I should let it go and concentrate on my studies. This session showed me that we waste a lot of time on non-profitable things. We long for beautiful clothes we cannot have. I promise I am going to change the way I do things.”

An 18 years boy confessed; “I told my teacher I want to drop out of school. I stay at my uncle's home and life there is difficult. Every day when I have to go home, I feel like I can flee to a far unknown place. I wonder why I should bother when there is no one who cares. Now I realise I need to care for myself, be patient and stay in that family so I can come to school and pursue my studies. I realise now that it is not like people who achieve their dreams go through a smooth path; therefore I should be patient, have hope, and work towards attaining what I want. I promise you I will succeed.”

'M'e concluded that although these students might look happy, the pain they carry with them is unbearable.

On a happier note, our village girls programs are doing well. This is the time for the annual selection for more participants in the Basotho Girls' Leadership Corps in the villages. This is the third year of the program and the difference in these girls is remarkable after their training, encouragement and support. They are so tiny when they start. We all take great joy from watching them grow into fine young women. The photo is one of our new recruits at her first training by their program officer, 'M'e Makoali.



We are all delighted with our new centre and feeling at home there now. Our first Grandmother Day in the new Graff Leadership Centre was exciting. This is the first time we have been able to host the grannies in a clean place with enough chairs and a kitchen to provide for the more than 60 attendants.

They could hardly believe their good fortune to have such a place to meet. The photo shows them trying on the glasses we brought. So many of them have cataracts and most of the rest need reading glasses. A special fashion show!

One woman, paralyzed in youth below the waist, crawled on her hands and knees up the long walkway. The walkways and halls are designed to accommodate the disabled and those in wheelchairs. We petitioned to get her a wheelchair to no avail. I am speaking to the Rotary Club in Maseru this week and will try again there.

Every day brings some new joy. One of our new library volunteers got the first position in Lesotho in her final exams. Each day brings new challenges. Such is life in Lesotho.



Winter-Spring 2011 - Letter #5

The final letter from a long trip is always a challenge. Each week so much goes on that it is difficult to capture the flavour of all that we do here.

In July, I promised the Help Lesotho local advisory committee a candle-lit dinner party to celebrate and thank those who have supported us in getting the land and during the construction for the Hlotse centre. It has been a long and often painful process. It is important to stop and celebrate such a huge accomplishment in our short history.

A celebration we did have! Despite the pouring rain, we decorated the buildings with great delight. The cooks made a wonderful feast; our invited guests came to visit our new home. Our staff hosted 50 people: local chiefs, government officials, the advisory committee members and local partners. Staff wore *seshoeshoe*, the local dress, and welcomed guests with a new sense of pride and accomplishment. 'M'e Ikaneng Taole made a lovely speech. Sister Alice introduced me with her usual charm and humour.

The library was perhaps our greatest joy. To have this new place for literacy and learning, stocked with Afro-centred books we have been collecting for three years, is a dream come true. We have great hopes for engaging children and adults raised in a non-literacy culture to take delight in books. The photos show our cheerful children's corner and the librarian, Ntate Semela, bursting with pride.



A small choir of our Basotho Girls Leadership Corps sang and danced a fabulous Sesotho song. They had hoped to look smart in their school uniforms, but the rain deluged them on their way home from school and they were drenched! They have the voices of angels! The photo shows them with their house mother, former teacher, 'M'e Isaaka. They were wonderful and we were proud!

The rain could not squelch our pleasure in hosting the community. It was a pause that helped us to realize that we had arrived – finally!

In my last letter I spoke of a grandmother who took 20 minutes to crawl up the walk on her hands and knees due to a paralysis of the lower legs. I was so touched when one reader offered to buy her a wheelchair. I am delighted to inform you that we were able to secure one free from a local doctor. What a change this will make in her life!



The grandmothers continue to make every effort to produce their own food with seeds provided by the Food Gifts for Grandmothers, led by Joanne Nelson and Mary Murphy. They receive food parcels in winter when there are no crops and seeds for their gardens during planting time. Our Grandmother Support Program seeks to provide sustainable

activities and reduce dependency. The grannies are also making crafts to sell. I bought durable mats made from plastic bags by the grannies for each of our entrances. They work so hard and are proud of their vegetables and products.

When Suzanne returned from her trip to Thaba Tseka, she was haunted by her visit with a young lad. Tsietsi is a 14 year old grade ten student at Thaba-Tseka High School who lives with his parents and his younger siblings a 2.5 hour walk from the school. Neither parent has regular work. His father gets piece jobs every now and then, mostly working as a shepherd caring for people's cattle. Tsietsi is the first born in the family and turns 15 in May. Tsietsi, already exceeding the grade seven education of his mother, passed grade seven with first class at Sefapanong Primary School and was tenth in his class in grade nine. Only his school fees are paid through Help Lesotho's Education Fund. Tsietsi's father travelled to the school to say thank you and was in tears to meet the staff. He declared that his boy is brilliant and that if not for Help Lesotho his son would never be able to attend secondary school. The boy's uniform is in tatters; there is not enough food at home and because of his long walk to and from school, his study time is limited and his grades are slipping. He plays soccer, listens to hip hop and loves to learn. He asks questions constantly, is a good listener and loves math and English. He hopes to be a mining engineer. He needs some place nearer the school where he can stay, be fed and have a chance at an education. As I listened to Suzanne tell his story, I recalled other young people who have been given a chance – and shed a tear for this one boy she longs to help.

I spoke last week to the local Rotary Club in Maseru. They were a fine group, so interested in our work. The members are distinguished leaders in society and spoke at length of their appreciation for our contribution to their country. I hope we can do some joint project with them in the future.

On April 16 in Belleville, ON, I am both speaking at and participating in the **Rotary Trump AIDS Poker Walk 2011** to raise funds for Help Lesotho and awareness for the situation in Lesotho. If you can join us or sponsor me, please go to <http://www.trumpaidsbelleville.ca/> and select "Sponsor a participant" ("Peg Herbert") or join the team to walk with us.

Each day I see how much your funds make a difference in the lives of individuals. One of our sponsored girls who failed by a small margin last year took second place in her class this year! Her little brother, struggling with AIDS and other health issues, boasted of his sister's achievement with pride. He failed last year due to his health, yet tries his very best again to do well. Learning here is difficult, and I so admire the endurance and persistence of these young people.

We celebrate each accomplishment in a country constantly challenged with economic and weather issues. In a budget speech delivered on February 14, 2011, which you can read on http://www.finance.gov.ls/news/budget_speech_2011_12.pdf, Lesotho's Finance Minister Timothy Thahane summarized his country's dire financial situation:

Not only have government revenues declined, he said, but 'Lesotho's economic growth has shrunk; unemployment, especially among the youth, has increased; our exports have contracted; and, Basotho mine workers in South Africa have been retrenched. This turmoil has placed Lesotho and its people between a rock and a hard place. We must make hard choices.'

Analysts fear those choices may include cuts in social spending which would be particularly devastating for a country where about 60 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and 23 percent of adults are infected with HIV....

Thahane acknowledged that the lack of resources resulting from the global economic crisis had halted Lesotho's progress on some of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly those relating to reductions in child and maternal mortality, combating HIV and TB and eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

Noting that this year's budget had been the most difficult the government had ever had to put together, he said: 'The time has come when we must all learn to do more with less for the sake of our country.'

I leave Lesotho once again, re-committed to the work we do, to help more children and grandmothers, and to create better learning environments and opportunities in our partner schools.

With the opening of the Seotlong Centre, Hlotse – the Graff Leadership Centre and Support Centre - we will reach thousands more each year. We now begin the second phase of Help Lesotho – with so many plans, a great staff and a committed group of donors.

It is worth it! We are part of miracles that are occurring in the most surprising places – because of you!

As I return to Canada, I look forward to hearing from you and to meeting many of you in the coming months. Thank you once again for your interest, your encouragement and, most of all, for walking this journey with us.

Rea leboha haholo. (We thank you so much.)

Fall 2010 – Letter #1

As the plane touched the airport tarmac in Lesotho last week, my mind flooded with memories of my first time to Lesotho, exactly seven years ago – alone and excited about this adventure into the unknown of an African culture. I have never lost my amazement and gratitude for all the wonderful people who have supported us since then and the privilege to know such fine people on both sides of the water.

For example, before I left for Lesotho, I was a guest of the District 15 school board in north-eastern New Brunswick. I spoke at an evening event, to the Bathurst Rotary Club, to teachers and at the annual meeting of all the provincial superintendents of education. Since 2006, District 15 has been a faithful member of the Help Lesotho family thanks to Marie Cashion, Superintendent John McLaughlin, Gary Branch and Audrey Gammon. Their students, teachers and community of the smallest and perhaps poorest school districts in the province have raised over \$65,000 for the children of Lesotho! Their leadership of compassion and humble generosity is inspirational.

When I arrived in Lesotho, I was excited to see our Country Director, Ntate Shadrack Mutembei and our incredible staff team who work so hard for those in our programs. For the first time in all these years, I have a bedroom to go to that is mine, a chair to work in and a place for my things at our new Support Centre in Hlotse. Coming home!

In February, I left Lesotho after two months of brutal construction duty. To now see the Support Centre and the Graff Leadership Centre complete, looking so inviting and blessing people daily is a dream come true and the result of so much faith in this vision. Each person who believed in it will receive our gratitude forever. We will never forget the patience of Mr. Laurence Graff and of Sandra and Paul Hellyer during the long months of construction delays. To have all this behind us and see the programs thriving is thrilling! Ntate Shadrack and I will travel to each school and grandmother group together looking for ever more effective ways to support these wonderful village heroes. Shadrack is passionate about leadership and our conversations are vigorous and motivating. We now have such a fine, experienced leader here to lead the organization.

It was Ntate Shadrack's first time to go to Thaba Tseka and see the breathtaking beauty of the high mountains. Where there should have been waterfalls and bulging streams cascading down the mountains from winter run-off, there were dry crevices or merely trickles of water. The shallow stream beds left a foreboding echo of impending drought if rains do not come. After the fiercely cold winter, the warmth of the early afternoon spring sun is most welcome. The emerging pink and white blossoms are a delight to the eyes.



As usual, we stayed at the "priest's house" at the mission in Thaba Tseka, on the edge of the mountain, a humble but safe place with nutritious meals morning and evening. There are still no sinks to wash in, but the electricity, small heater and water were working and we were comfortable.

Visits to the schools are special – a renewal of old friendships, a chance to listen to the teachers and principals and, of course, to see the children! Our partner schools in Canada are patient with the challenges of opposite seasons and school holidays, long delays in communication and the most basic forms of exchanges of friendship. Their work is valued and appreciated here so much more than they know.

Tackling the farthest first, we went to Sefapanong Primary, which is twinned with Turnbull School in Ottawa. Evidence of this six-year partnership is everywhere, from the pigs and chickens, to Turnbull Hall, to classroom stoves, uniforms and shoes for the orphans and the wonderful flash cards the Turnbull students had made for math and English. Last year 'M'e Mampaka and I implored the district administrator (similar to a provincial premier) for new outhouses or pit latrines, or to empty the existing ones in our primary schools in this area. They did two schools of the three. The latrines in



Sefapanong are unusable and after four years, 700 children still have no place to go to the bathroom! (Yes, we visited the district administrator again to bring up this issue, among others.) What these schools have to deal with is beyond our imaginations.

One Grade 7 orphan, the head of her household looking after two younger brothers, was discovered to be seven months pregnant, six weeks before her final primary school exams. She lives in a small hut up in the mountains. While we were there, the principal discovered this and that she and her brothers were literally starving. The child had never seen a doctor and hid her pregnancy under a bulky coat in fear of censure and expulsion from school before she could write her exams. The principal called the relatives. None could help her. 'M'e took the half day to take the girl to the clinic in town. She fought back tears for this child and the lack of money for her weekly transport to the clinic and for food for her and her brothers. The World Food Program withdrew from this area entirely, so there is no more watery porridge for the children in the morning. There is a sparse lunch provided by the ministry, with beans and an egg once a week for protein. These are the painful challenges of a rural principal in Lesotho, herself a classroom teacher plus her administrative duties, for a school with 122 in each classroom.

At Paray Primary, twinned with John McCrae Elementary in Guelph, I bought candles made by the orphans. Years ago, we purchased moulds and wax for the children to learn the art of candle making. The proceeds buy small things for the neediest children. I will bring them home to sell and multiply the funds for their efforts. Each dollar matters. I bought some mats made by our grandmothers from waste plastic bags too. I pay them directly and the few dollars raised go back into their program. Although I cannot bring back much, these are symbols of people trying so hard to help themselves.

At Paray and Thaba Tseka High Schools, we visited with some students who I have known for six years, who have attended camp or gender conferences all these years. It is such a delight to see them confident, articulate, loving and determined to be young leaders. Sponsorship has changed their lives in so many ways. Each one promises us his or her best performance on the impending final exams.

We spent a long time at Katlehong Primary. Parents at their twinned school, Corpus Christi Elementary in Ottawa, had challenged the school with a 2-to-1 matching of the funds the school could raise. In a remarkably short period of time, they raised enough to repair all the classrooms, fix leaking roofs, patch holes in the walls, re-cement damaged floors, buy blackboards for the classrooms (see the one in this photo), repair desks and freshly parge broken concrete walls.

Ntate Shadrack's experience with construction as former country director for Habitat for Humanity in Lesotho is a great asset. He and a contractor inspected every inch of the school for maximum use of funds to restore this old and over-crowded school of 800 students – with classroom sizes of 130 in some and 147 others! Over the next months, there will be fresh and cheerful paint, new hope, and improved learning environments. The students and staff are so grateful – and excited!





A secret joy of being up in the mountains is walking alone up and down the trails to think. Even if I have only half an hour, it refreshes the soul. On one such outing, villagers were carefully butchering a huge pig. I noticed a dear friend, 'M'e Tsebo, the former principal at Paray Primary. It was hard not to think of the waste in Canada as they worked diligently prepare each part of the animal for maximum use. In one spot lay the hoofs, in another, the head, and in yet another, the intestines. It took the entire day to do this, to find enough sticks for the fires and to carefully save each piece.

We have returned home to Hlotse. It was a good trip and somehow with the arrival of spring, another fresh feeling of hope!

Fall 2011 – Letter #2

Sheep bells tinkle in the background as I write. The shepherd, in his filthy, tattered blanket, shuffles along behind the sheep, leaning on his walking stick with a downward glance. The wind whistles through the fields across from the centre and makes our metal roof moan.



Last Saturday, Help Lesotho held one of its school-based Anti-AIDS Club events with 400 youth for a six-school competition of speeches on AIDS and dramas on gender equity at a partner school. The event lasted all day and we provided a nutritious hot lunch. The speeches were remarkable. One speaker represented each Club. As these young people spoke of getting AIDS, they painfully told stories of rape, careless sex or prostitution. Their faces grimaced when they spoke of how they had been discriminated against and sent from their families. One recounted her chief expelling her from her

village in a public rage of insults and condemnations. The speakers graphically described the terrible sores they had all over their bodies, their emaciated skeletons and their fears and thoughts of suicide. It was riveting. I watched the faces of the audience and fought the tears rising in my eyes. These brave young people were giving names and images to the sorrows and pain of those who watched. Many heads were down to hide their suffering but most listened to every word, compelled by some fierce force of empathy to hear it all. I shall never forget it.

Not only was it an astonishing example of group therapy but it was a testimonial to the weekly work our staff do to help youth open up about AIDS and its demons. Our program staff were all there to support this effort, whether they needed to be or not. Teachers who lead these clubs told us how the multi-day training

we held recently for 16 Anti-AIDS Club leads had changed their lives and encouraged them in this difficult work. They implored us to train their colleagues as well.

A recent press release from the European Union Commissioner on Lesotho is graphic: "Lesotho has the third highest HIV adult prevalence rate in the world at 23 percent; 27 percent of women, 18 percent of men (aged 15–49) and 39 percent of children under 5 are affected. At the end of 2008, the number of people living with HIV was estimated at 280,000, of whom 21,000 were children. The total number of orphans is estimated to be around 220,000. 185,000 HIV-positive people are receiving care (ARV treatment and pre-ARV monitoring)."

http://finchannel.com/news_flash/World/94390_EU_development_cooperation_with_Lesotho/

As I read that, I know that the clinic near us has been out of condoms and latex gloves for weeks. How many more will get AIDS because of that?



We visited Bokoro Primary School (twinned with Riverview Alternative School in Ottawa), Bokoro High School (twinned with Ridgemont High School in Ottawa) and St. Charles High School (twinned with Elmwood School in Ottawa) in the northern corner of Lesotho. Our Ottawa schools would be proud to see how these teachers and children try so hard to improve their learning environments. Each is geographically remote. These wonderful teachers and principals are deeply concerned about the increasing number of starving and depressed children who are having such a hard time concentrating that many fail. I talked to one class for about 20 minutes – my favourite thing. One small 13-year-old boy came to meet us. His grandfather and only relative died a few weeks ago. The boy is living alone with no food and no one to care for him. He showed me the uniform and shoes that Help Lesotho had given him. I asked him if he washed his own clothes; he said he did. When I complimented him on how clean and tidy he was, despite the hem being down as evidence of recent growth, he beamed and my heart broke. Our **Orphan Relief Fund** gave him the uniform but we do not have enough to put him on food vouchers. It was hard to leave him, and even harder to know that there are so many more children just like him.

Last Sunday the power was out all day. This is not surprising. In fact, it is rather predictable. The surprising thing was that I was not prepared! My computer battery was dead! You'd think I would learn!

Our two CIDA-funded interns, Alison MacDonald and Tara Doolan, are concluding their year working with



Help Lesotho. They have spent the last 12 months learning about the culture, working long hours for the children and youth and supporting our staff and programs. It takes so many people and such dedication for the work we do and we all appreciate their commitment and love for the Basotho. They have made important contributions and will be missed by everyone. The staff and children love them.

This next week is busy with more school visits, a meeting with His Majesty, King Letsie III, whom many of you will fondly remember, and hosting the Canadian High Commissioner to South Africa and Lesotho, who will

come from Pretoria. On Wednesday evening I will speak to 40 – 50 of the country directors in Lesotho and some of their board members and others at an Executive Leadership Forum. Her Excellency, High Commissioner Dion will attend as well. It is a rare and important opportunity to discuss our work with those in the non-governmental organizations. Collectively, these leaders influence the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in desperate need in Lesotho.

I think of home and the last days of summer, and children going back to school. We have so much to be grateful for!

PS. Some of you were asking about the young pregnant girl who was looking after her little brothers. Last night the little boys lit a candle for light and it caught their clothes and burned. Luckily no one was hurt but now they have lost their clothing! A never ending nightmare for this wee family!

Fall 2011 – Letter #3

As I write, I am listening to a very small girl who has been sitting in the *lappa* in front of the Graff Leadership Centre playing a harmonica for two hours. Her back is to me and I wonder what she is thinking. It is Saturday and the young people are streaming to the centre to study in the library and have discussion groups and tutoring. Some young boys are playing basketball on the play-pad. A few young men have gathered to chat in the other *lappa*. It is a busy and thriving place. The BGLC girls have been up early doing their Saturday laundry, which hangs on the lines at the back of the property. Several are playing skipping games with our youth leaders.



This week Shadrack and I visited Pitseng High School and its principal, my dear friend, Sr. Alice, where we have a large number of sponsored children. We spent a fair bit of time at Khethisa High School whose twin school, St. Thomas Aquinas in Russell, Ontario, and the Belleville Rotary Club have worked hard to build a bath house where 300 girls can wash in dignity. What a wonderful sight to see this building and know what a difference it will make to these girls. The fact that so many students at St. Thomas Aquinas and Rotarians value the sanitation and privacy of these girls is a real example here of how much young women are valued. We also visited Pontmain Primary. The principal, 'M'e Mantoetsi, lost her 21-year-old daughter a few weeks ago. 'M'e is on our advisory committee for the Pitseng Centre and is such a wonderful woman. Pontmain is

twinned with St. Francis of Assisi School in Ottawa. I am bringing back the most lovely school project the children did for their Canadian friends. These special gifts of love are my most precious cargo in travel. The effort and thought that has gone into the project is dear.



You may remember the story of the school with no roof, Motati Primary, twinned with Deep Cove Elementary on Vancouver Island. It is a place reborn. Although struggling with abject poverty, the teachers are an outstanding team. They have made staff uniforms of black clothes and a turquoise scarf at the neck. Even the one male teacher wears it – a symbol of good leadership and solidarity. They invited the chief and the head of the parent council to meet with us – again, a sign of strong community involvement.

Our visit to Mokoena Primary, twinned with Rockcliffe Park Public School in Ottawa, allowed us to see the exciting progress as Rockcliffe Park funds gradually rebuild this very remote school. The classrooms are mud and stone with thatched roofs.

One by one, the buildings are being restored with new thatched or tin roofs, windows, patched and painted walls, floors, blackboards, bookshelves and doors. Formerly dark, dreary classrooms are now filled with light and hope. The floors are no longer piles of crumbling cement. The children can read the blackboards. Although still very basic by our terms, these renewed learning environments will make such a difference to the children and teachers, who are so appreciative.



We spent two days in Maseru for meetings. Our visit with His Majesty, King Letsie III was lovely. He is unfailingly gracious and warm. We reminisced about his trip to Canada and he urged me to send his regards to the donors and sponsors he met in Ottawa and to those he was unable to meet but who support our work. He reiterated his desire to visit the centre to see it in action again.

We were finally able to meet with the Minister of Finance and with the Canadian High Commissioner to Lesotho, Adele Dion, with the CIDA Head of Development AID and with Chris Johnson, from the Pretoria High Commission. They joined us for the event with the country directors for Lesotho and everyone appreciated their presence. It was nice to have a contingency from Canada with Donna Bawden as well. The event went well and focused on the emotional aspects of working with orphans and the poor. Her Excellency and Chris were lovely to host and enjoyed the ride to Hlotse and the visit at our Seotlong Centre. They were able to see some programs in operation and to hear directly from some beneficiaries about the significance of the programs in their lives.

Our biggest struggle by far these days is to raise funds for our **Orphan Relief Fund** to help these children – and the ever-growing numbers who are alone, starving and in need of such small things. The fund buys

simple things such as soap, toothpaste, eyeglasses and transportation to the hospital for appointments, sanitary supplies and emergency expenses. In some cases it buys food so that the children can digest the anti-retroviral drugs if they have AIDS. Turning them away is unbearable!

I am in the final stretch of the visit this time and will send one more letter. Thank you to all those who send encouraging notes and for your patience with the time it has taken me to reply. I hope each reader realizes that, one child, one school, one grandmother at a time, we **are** making an enormous difference here with your funds. We are grateful for your support each and every day.

Letsatsi le monate (have a good day).

Fall 2011 – Letter #4

As I leave Lesotho again, I think of the people we have met on our travels – the educators, youth, grandmothers and orphans. My ears resonate at the memory of their stories and I catch myself welling up with tears when I think of how much they are suffering. This always balances with the wonderful things that are going on, albeit not necessarily on the same days.



Our dear grannies are getting old and many are very sick now. Some are getting so forgetful. Some come on the wrong day; others inevitably come two hours early or a day late to the Grandmother Days. One has to smile! The winter food parcels from the Food Gifts for Grandmothers kept them alive over those cold winter months. It is spring now in Lesotho and the grannies get seeds for their gardens. I always think of the incredible Canadian women who fund this program – and wish they could really see that it is a life-saving support for them.

We want to thank each individual grandmother sponsor as well as the Amazin’ Mamas (in Guelph), the Go Grannies Go (in Toronto), the Grandmothers Helping Grandmothers (in Fredericton), the Solar Grannies (in Edmonton), and the Kingston Grandmother Connection.

I saw these pages pasted on the staff window of a primary school. Although thrilled that the school was so open, at the same time it is devastating that this kind of commentary is necessary. One imagines the woman who posted it. Abuse is the hardest issue to deal with. I so often imagine how these young girls, let alone grown women, keep going. It is hard to protect oneself when there are so few of one’s family left.

At each school, I visited with sponsored children who will graduate out of our program in December 2011. This will be our



largest graduating class ever with sixty students! Some I have known for seven years and have watched them grow up. The children are truly sad to say goodbye to HL – you and Help Lesotho have been their families. We hope to stay in touch with these students as they move on to the next stage of their lives. We are so blessed to have committed sponsors who have seen these children through till graduation. The staff in Lesotho is currently visiting our primary schools to identify the children most in need of sponsorship to attend secondary school – the list could be endless.

One of the most touching things to witness is the joy of a child receiving a letter from their sponsor. They feel special and so loved that someone cares enough to write to them. We have many children in our program who never receive a letter though, and this can be terribly disheartening to the child. If you would like to write generic letters to children who never receive them, please contact kate@helplesotho.org. A letter can be such a lifeline!



I took this photo in frank amazement one afternoon as I was walking at the edge of a mountain overlooking a river hundreds of metres below. I was incredulous as, one after another, these children emerged from the dark one-room hut. There were five in all but two ran shyly back into the room when they saw me. There were no adults in sight. I wondered if they lived alone. Such are one's thoughts when one sees children like this in Lesotho.

The local staff asked if it were at all possible to raise \$1,200 for sound equipment for the camp, centre programs and the school-based Anti-AIDS Clubs to buy speakers, a microphone and the various connections required to reach large crowds of 200 – 1,000 people. We have so many large youth events and often have to rent equipment at a significant cost or inconvenience. If you can contribute, please let me know.

Our amazing team in Canada – Suzanne, Kate and Kevin – have been doing exciting things while I have been gone. What a gift to never have to worry about the Canadian office while I am away. We will launch our new website within the next couple of weeks, so from now on www.helplesotho.org will be the address (our .ca addresses will still work).



It has been an excellent visit, I leave knowing that we are doing everything we possibly can. Having a great staff with enormous hearts allows us to continue, one day at a time, to deliver, improve and expand programs that give life and hope.

It is a privilege!
Thank you for joining us.
Khotsong (peace to you).
Peg