



2012

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Spring 2012 – Letter #1

Lumelang,

The morning light brings chicken clucks, cow bells and the chaotic sound of competing bird choruses in our enormous eucalyptus trees. I am back home in Lesotho after a six month absence! There is indeed a fall “nip” in the air in the mornings and evenings. Talk wanders to thoughts of impending cold as winter approaches – it is never far from the Basotho mind.

It has been a busy first week with many programs, guests and representatives of new partnerships:

- **USAID** has partnered with us to support and increase our work in Thaba Tseka. Their funds have allowed us to open an office in Thaba Tseka this week. We have rented a space from the Red Cross – lest you think we have been crazy enough to start construction again! We have five schools, youth programming and a grandmother group there;
- **Habitat for Humanity Lesotho’s** partnership will repair 95 grandmothers’ huts and build them pit latrines;
- **UN Population Fund (UNFPA)** were so impressed with our work with village youth that they have offered some support for those programs; and
- **Yes We Care!** from Germany - a lovely group headed by Dr. Irina Andre-Lang that sponsors children through Help Lesotho at Pitseng High School. They have 16 children now and are determined to get 50 more by the end of June!

We are seriously understaffed to manage all the work we have on our plate at the Graff Leadership Centre. Our philosophy has always been to hire locally but we have advertised repeatedly for one senior position in our education and leadership program and have been unable to find anyone with the right experience. ... and so we now put out a **call for a newly retired Canadian high school principal or department head** for a two year posting to help and build capacity. I have the job description if you know just the right person.

Sadly, our wonderful Grandmother Support Officer, 'M'e Makatleho, retires at the end of the month. We will miss her terribly, as will her beloved grandmothers. The bright side is that her replacement, 'M'e Feleng, is embracing the position with energy and determination. We are grateful to have had 'M'e Makatleho these past years and now to have 'M'e Feleng.

It is very special for me to have my sister, Anne Richards, come with me this time to see all that we have accomplished here. She is looking after me! Anne is our health information advisor and co-founder of our largest grandmother group, the Kingston Grandmother Connection (KGH). Without her leadership and the KGC for these past six years, the grandmother program would not have been possible. At the grandmother day in Pitseng last Thursday, Anne was moved to tears at our dear grandmothers and their wee grandchildren, the singing, dancing and the joy they feel being part of this life-transforming group. One marvels at their resilience and appreciation; one rails against the injustice of the world and concern for their poverty.

Dr. Naida Hyde arrived yesterday to do psychosocial training for various programs. She is such a great supporter in British Columbia – constantly begging people to sponsor children – and they do!

Anne and I leave for Thaba Tseka today for the week to visit schools and our grandmothers, see Help Lesotho's new office and meet with various people.

It is wonderful to be back in Lesotho. It gave me such delight on Saturday to see children playing on the play pad and in the yard; boys playing soccer and basketball in the fields outside; the library so packed with children of all ages that you could not fit one more in; 75 village children receiving tutoring in English; sponsored children coming for help and counselling; youth discussing life in the *lappa* and our BGLC girls in study time. Community groups, such as AIDS support groups can "rent" a lappa or a room for the cost of submitting an agenda of their meeting. In one week we had an AIDS support group meeting, our young mothers' support group meeting, the ladies' craft group learning to knit, computer classes, afternoon study times, three full mornings of youth training and many partnership meetings and guest visits. We are in month two of our four-month youth training. Fifty-five young people, aged 20-30, are selected to receive life skills, HIV/AIDS and gender equity education and community engagement experience. This is the seventh year of this program and it has truly changed the lives of hundreds of young people. I facilitated two four-hour sessions this week: one on grief and loss and one on stereotyping to address discrimination, especially around women and HIV/AIDS. Of 55 youth, about 95% said they have never discussed their grief. It is impossible to overstate how important these sessions are to help heal the isolation and depression caused by the AIDS pandemic here.



The Seotlong Centre in Hlotse is bursting at the seams with children, youth and grandmothers. It is everything we had hoped for! After the endless construction, program development and other challenges, it fills my heart with joy to see it being used so well, so often and by so many. We are forever grateful to the FACET Foundation and all those who supported this dream.

Miracles are possible! *Salang hantle*

Spring 2012 – Letter #2

Lumelang,

I am writing in the dark, the power is off. Rain is gently falling – welcome rain on the parched soil. The crops are poor, some almost dehydrated on the stock. As people start gathering the crops in preparation for the winter’s cold nights, they speak of their disappointment. As hardship is such a constant companion here, words are few – one glance is enough. We all know what that means.

I am watching the children going to school. It is 6:45 am. They have nothing to cover themselves with to ward off the rain. I think of them sitting in classrooms all day, soaked and hungry. Many are little and have so far to walk.



Our trip to Thaba Tseka was productive and happy. The drive up is spectacular, the panoramic scenery is breathtaking and the people are wonderful. The town is jubilant that Help Lesotho will have a stable presence to provide more support to those in most need. We helped 'M'e Mamozi with the many chores to open a new office and start a large project. I visited our schools and interviewed candidates for a new staff position there. We have two youth assistants who are delightful. One is a former sponsored child, Mathata, who scored in the top ten in the entire country! He is a remarkable young man

who will secure government scholarships for his dream to become a doctor. I also met several other graduates from our system but most are inaccessible. I imagine an annual Reunion Day for Help Lesotho graduates at the centre to share their successes and stories, delight in each other's company and renew camp and conference friendships. Wouldn't it be fun!

We visited Katlehong Primary School to marvel at the completed renovation of the school. With funds raised by students and teacher at Corpus Christi Elementary School in Ottawa, and matched by two generous donors, we saw repaired ceilings, patched roofs, mended walls and refurbished classrooms with colourful paint and new chalkboards and desks. Pit latrines have been revitalized, stairs reconstituted and new resource books purchased. The transformation is complete and the school community is bursting with thanks. The overcrowded school with about 850 students will now be a happier, more productive learning environment for years to come. The photo shows the principal, 'M'e Mpho, with some of the new books for the students.



We took handmade flashcards and learning aids from Turnbull School students to their twin, Sefapanong Primary. Classsizes are still impossible, with 126 or 131 children to a room. Turnbull Hall provides a spacious learning environment for the Standard 7 students who are preparing for their national exams. The rest of the students are crammed into classrooms with five to a desk or only a bench. School twinning provides so much support and friendship.

My sister Anne and I went to a village halfway up the side of a mountain to visit Help Lesotho's dear grannies. There was a huge crowd of grannies and their grandchildren and they loved having their photos taken for us to show their friends in Canada. Their ragged clothing brings to mind the bitter winds and snow that will descend on them soon. It is a marvel how these old ladies and small children manage with no insulation, resources or visible means of support. Without our Grandmother Support Program, they just might not.

When we joined them for their monthly Grandmother Day, they were singing and dancing with us – filled with joy at their group and the tremendous difference it has made. They gave testimonials of their previous depression and the difference they feel now that they have a group, a small income-generating project, food parcels, mattresses, shoes and blankets and, most importantly, the education which helps them raise their orphans and manage the stress in their lives.

You would be so proud of our staff here. Shadrack, Gillian and Ikaneng provide our leadership – working tirelessly to reach standards of excellence under impossible odds. Shadrack has been such a blessing and so successful at securing these new partnerships and in-country funding. He, his lovely wife and four gorgeous children are now finally and happily ensconced in Hlotse. Bless their hearts for their commitment to Help Lesotho!

Shadrack and I have our heads down doing the budget and staffing projections for next year (our financial year starts July 1). With the economy as it is, it is so hard to predict donations. If each of our donors changed to monthly automatic bank withdrawals, we would be able to plan better and would have a steady cash flow that we could count on. Our focus over the next five years is sustainability. Steady monthly donations are what will make that possible.

Yesterday we held a morning of strategic planning with the staff. It was wonderful to hear them articulate their dreams for Help Lesotho over the next three years and their creative ideas for mitigating or overcoming potential obstacles. We know our communities and the people we serve and are determined – as one body – to increase our efficiency, program impact and outreach to those who need us most. It is challenging, exciting and ever daunting but we are up for it and with your help, this organization will continue to make you proud!

Khotsong (peace to you all).

Spring 2012 – Letter #3

Lumelang,



As staff lined up so joyfully on Friday morning to await Their Majesties, King Letsie III and Queen Masenate, it did seem like a celebration of so many challenges overcome. The staff were beautifully attired in their traditional *seshoeshoe*.

Their Majesties were, predictably, perfectly on time. As their police escort rolled into the centre yard, staff burst out in ululating choruses – a wonderful welcome. Our Country Director, Ntate Shadrack, introduced each member of the staff. The last time His Majesty came to the centre was the official opening in March 2010 with Mr. Graff and the Hellyers. The buildings were still a construction site and the Support Centre was a hollow shell. Now those same buildings are bursting with beneficiaries and programs. From the Support Centre to the Graff Leadership Centre, staff explained their programs, challenges and impact. The king and queen visited grannies in the *lappa*, perused the Afro-centred books in the library and listened to the graduating students of career guidance, computer and health classes. They heard from the young adults in our three-month leadership training program and a representative of our Basotho Girls' Leadership Corps. We fed well over one hundred people.



The photo above shows Her Majesty holding a **Pearls for Girls** gift package of a beautiful pearl bracelet and matching earrings. Founded by Mary Murphy, Pearls for Girls (www.pearlsforgirls.org), its volunteers and customers raise significant funds for our girls' leadership programs in Lesotho. The beautiful jewellery Mary designs is a reminder to all those who sell and buy it that girls in Lesotho need so much help to grow up safe, confident and purposeful. We are so appreciative.

Our flagship girls' leadership program, the Basotho Girls Leadership Program, has two components: a girls' residential program and a Grade 7 girls' village program. By developing enough girls who know the facts, who can speak authoritatively and who have a strong sense of community responsibility, we hope to influence many hundreds of their peers in understanding HIV/AIDS, gender equity and leadership. In our fourth year now, the girls range from 12–17. It is a delight to see them growing into fine, articulate young women who are committed to helping their country. Their Program Officer, Motseoa, is a fine young role model who has returned from international studies to assist her country and her community.

I visited Khethisa High School and heard how appreciative the 300 girls who use the new bathhouse are to St. Thomas Aquinas School and the Belleville Rotary Club. Their funding allowed these young women to bathe and dress out of the elements and away from prying eyes. The Belleville Rotary Club generosity also helps fund our Anti-AIDS Clubs in our partner schools. It takes so many groups to help make all this happen.

While I cram visits and meetings into my final week here, I am grateful to the Canadian staff for holding down the fort in my absence who are working hard on the donor side of our activities. One challenge Hilary (our new Director of Donor Relations) is struggling with is to explain to child sponsors about the high rates of early marriages, grade failures, disappearances and teen pregnancies. From the Canadian side, it is hard to imagine the conditions here. The staggering number of orphans and vulnerable children mean that there are few to guide or protect the girls. Early marriages deprive so many of their youth. Children fail for so many reasons. They may have to stay home to do the chores or to look after the sick or the animals. Most are struggling in silence to understand a world that leaves them alone, hungry and frightened. It is almost impossible to learn when you are preoccupied with survival. Children fail because their early instruction in key subjects like English, Math and Science are taught by unqualified teachers who do not have a grasp of the material themselves. Children disappear as relatives ship them to yet another location for someone else to look after them. Both Hilary and I are deeply touched that sponsors are patient and understanding of these hardships and do not blame the children or Help Lesotho. These are the unfortunate conditions in which we are trying to help. Each year a child stays in school, there are so many benefits throughout her life—on almost all measures of well-being.

Knowing full well how these children struggle, we initiate another program to provide even more psychosocial support to the children in the rural areas, what we are simply calling **Children's Days**. Modelled on the highly successful Grandmother Days, the children will come for Saturday sessions on grief and loss, AIDS and gender awareness, to protect themselves as they grow. We have prepared one-pagers in English on one side and in Sesotho on the other on key topics (human trafficking, risky behaviour, health, alcohol and drug abuse, etc.), which we want to distribute to all the children to take home as resources to

treasure and share with their families and friends. They will also enjoy fun activities and eat nutritious food. Once we secure the funding, we expect to reach hundreds of children this way, especially those who have no access to any of our other programs. We will include the children of grandmothers, of child-headed households and those identified by the community as struggling the most. If you feel you can support this initiative, you could donate monthly on www.helplesotho.org. We want to reach as many children as possible with psychosocial support.

Thank you for passing these letters on to your friends, colleagues and families.

Letsatsi le monate (Have a good day).

Spring 2012 - Letter #4

Greetings,



His enormous brown eyes searched my face. He had been waiting to see me for over an hour. I know the woman who sent him. As I sat beside him, my heart melted. His clothes were clean, absolutely threadbare, ripped and too small. He came to seek help for his mother. He explained very clearly that she had AIDS and felt sick: "She lies down a lot and when she has nothing to eat the drugs make her sick." Bongone is in Grade 5, has a brother in Grade 6 and there are two babies. Their father is deceased. Here was this adorable, tiny, nine-year-old boy pleading for his family. He never once asked for anything for himself. As 'M'e Mampaka discussed his situation with him, an asthma puffer fell out of his pocket. That seemed to touch her deeply. This wee boy is not in our system and is not a sponsored child or even known to anyone. Because of the generosity of donors to the **Orphan Relief Fund**, 'M'e went herself to buy him new clothes and shoes. 'M'e gave him information on local support groups for women with AIDS. His bravery and personal dignity will stay with me for a long time!

If I may blatantly brag, a review of the 2011 school results shows Help Lesotho students exceeding the national average with students consistently in the top ten for the country. At Paray High School, for example, of the 139 students who wrote the final exam, three got first-class results – all were Help Lesotho sponsored children! Khethisa High School, where we have invested a lot of funds, has the best results of all our schools with many sponsored students excelling. Of all students in Lesotho who wrote their final high school exams, 22% received either first or second class, but 35% of the Help Lesotho students received those grades. Not all students can reach these heights because of the trauma in their lives, but we are proud to report that many of our sponsored children are among the best in their schools!

I regret not having time to go to many of our schools. The lovely student books that go back and forth between twinned schools and the sponsors' letters will be delivered at the end of the month when 'M'e Mampaka goes.



I did, however, see many grandmothers and their children! We spoke about the monthly grandmother sponsors and our grandmother groups without whom the Grandmother Program would not be possible: the Kingston Grandmother Connection (Kingston), the Amazing Mamas (Guelph), Grandmothers Helping Grandmothers (Fredericton), the Solar Grannies (Edmonton), the Food Gifts for Grandmothers (Ottawa) and the Go Grannies Go (Toronto). You may remember that last year I wrote of a disabled grandmother who crawled for great distances to attend the meetings. Because of a donor's generosity, she now has a wheelchair and even met Their Royal Highnesses last week.



Lives are being changed, one person at a time. For example, 74-year-old 'M'e Malerato lives in a single-room house with 12 others on the side of a mountain. Her husband's death left her to look after their eight children alone. She survived by doing domestic work and planting her fields. With age, she could no longer work or tend the fields. The death of four of her children from AIDS left her with four grandchildren. Her youngest son, his wife and their six children live under her roof. Her son is unemployed. 'M'e Malerato supports the entire family on her old age pension of CAD\$38 a month. She fell into depression. After being chosen by her chief for the

Help Lesotho Grandmother Program, 'M'e began to laugh again and to feel motivated and cared for. She started planting vegetables and enjoying her grandchildren. She received a blanket, shoes, a mattress and food parcels through the winter months. She joined the village support group. She knows her HIV status. She says her new glasses are the new eyes with which she can see the world again. Changing one life changed twelve others – and on it goes.

Today is our day to test for HIV/AIDS for our youth trainees. After weeks of discussion and thoughtful, often fearful decision making, 60 or more will know their status by the end of the day – that is powerful knowledge!

As I return to Canada, I know the organization is in great shape with the quality of local leadership and trained staff to reach ever more people, more effectively. You would be touched by the commitment of the staff – the ones who make all this happen.

It is a privilege to do this work. We thank you for your trust and for each dollar you donate!

Khotsong (peace).