



2014

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Winter-Spring 2014 – Letter #1

Greetings from Lesotho for 2014,

I am happy to be in my Basotho home. After about 24 hours, it seems as if I never left. This trip though, I have guests. Mary Ann Turnbull, founder of Turnbull School in Ottawa, twinned with Sefapanong Primary for eight years, is here with her dear husband Chris – also a huge supporter. Mary Ann is a charter Board Member, a member of the Finance and Audit Committee, and is acquainted with our many challenges and successes. She has been very active with Pearls 4 Girls and all our big events.

The thoughtful and fun staff welcome for the Turnbull's brought tears to our eyes. They were treated to staff singing and dancing – often in hilarious positions – with Basotho hats and blankets. I was deeply moved at this opportunity to show how much we appreciate all they have done and continue to do for our work. It is hard for people in Canada – even board members – to really know what our work entails here on the ground. It is multi-faceted and fraught with endless challenges to overcome. It is also unbelievably effective. Words pale in describing how many lives are deeply changed. To see them finally experience this for themselves is such a joy.

The Turnbull's spent a couple of days in Hlotse, two nights at our Pitseng Centre and then went up to Thaba Tseka. It is summer, of course, and was hot and sunny when we arrived. Just as the Turnbull's left Hlotse, the weather turned to rain and cloud. It is such a blessing for the parched fields and gardens, but not perfect for travelling through spectacular scenery and living in huts. They are troupers though, always flexible and appreciative. It is fun to listen to them strive to pronounce the seemingly impossible Sesotho words – it all comes in time. Basotho time!

On Thursday, we drove up to Thaba Tseka. In the couple of dozen times I have driven up there, I have never seen anything like it. We were in the clouds for a long stretch – water cascading down the mountains

ferociously, tumbling run-off soil and sheets of water on the road. I know these roads well but it was quite something. My trip down alone was much easier with only about 15 minutes in real cloud. I had lots of company on the roads:



I came down on Saturday – four hours of mountain driving. I saw four funerals and many dozen villagers walking to and from other funerals hidden from the road. I was struck by the men watching their animals, leisurely talking, sitting and walking together while the women and girls carry huge buckets of perhaps 60lbs. of water up and down steep slopes, wash clothes on the rocks in streams, carry the heavy wet bundles home to hang out, cook, and work in the fields. Women work so hard here.

The Turnbull's were welcomed in so many ways. The students of Katlehong Primary, twinned with Corpus Christi Elementary in Ottawa, had a full outdoor assembly of the teachers and 850 students, with singing, dancing and special, locally made gifts.

When we arrived at Sefapanong, this tiny school in the middle of nowhere, the students and teachers were overjoyed to meet this woman who had championed them for so many years. Because of Turnbull School, they had uniforms, shoes, class stoves, chickens, seeds, blankets, and dental hygiene care with actual examinations. Some parents at Turnbull have even stepped up as families to sponsor children or become long time donors. The children waved signs of welcome, sang and desperately reached out to touch the Turnbull's. Mary Ann and Chris were moved to tears – and so was I. It was all I could do to compose myself to take the photos of this happy reunion.



I left them for a week, well settled in their hut and happy. They will work in the school, walking 45 minutes over the mountains each way with the children. Quite the experience!

Our dear friend Sister Alice was in a terrible car accident just before Christmas. She broke an arm, a leg and her jaw bone on one side of her body. Her companion, Sr. Alina, died. Sr. Alice lost most of her teeth. She has completed the operations to mend/pin the bones and is doing well. She is out of the hospital in a convent now and undergoing physiotherapy. Many of you have been praying for her – thank you. Please continue to pray as her recovery will take some time.

For those who donated knitting needles, thank you. I brought them over and they were received with much appreciation. We have enough now. I also brought the eye glasses you gave and they will be distributed to our grannies this month. We have enough for this group of 250 for the next couple of years – thank you again.

The staff made me open a personal Twitter account (@pegherbert) if you are interested. Where internet allows I will tweet daily. My iphone died and I have had trouble with my Lesotho phone – some things never change!

My personal thanks to the many people who send me little notes of encouragement and interest. I look forward to sharing the impact of our work with you and our exciting plans for the next couple of years.

Wishing you well from Lesotho

Winter-Spring 2014 – Letter #2

Lumelang,

The power is out as I write; the water has been off and on. I will continue until my battery runs out and then resume later.

During my days, I wonder which are the best examples of how lives are being changed here - there are so many.



For example, one graduate from our Young Mothers' Program came with her baby to tell me that because of the program, she learned that she could make changes to improve her life. She learned to be patient and to control the anger that she was previously consumed by. She said the program helped her realize she did not have to continue to have so many concurrent partners – that it was not a bad thing to be alone with her baby and focus on the baby's needs. Now she has achieved a sense of peace with herself. Her visit made my day!



Another little girl about seven came to the Centre yesterday – with the traditional black rag wrapped around her neck to indicate someone had ‘passed’ in the family. She told me her father died this week. As I gave her a hug and just rested my head against hers, I was so grateful that we had this wonderful place for her to come to be comforted.

One of the VERY rural out-of-school youth stood up in a huge group and said: “I prayed to God to give me a mother. He gave me Help Lesotho!”

As we are currently understaffed, I don’t know where we would be without our four internationals. Pat Foreman, a retired Canadian principal, is here again for six months and is amazing at supporting staff development. Jessica Detrio, on loan from the American Peace Corps for two years, is doing a great job with our Hlotse centre programs. Emily Nielson and Marie-Claire Klassen are Canadian interns funded by CIDA through ICAD for a year. Marie-Claire works in Thaba Tseka; Emily is in Hlotse and Pitseng. These excerpts from their reports also tell the story.

When asked to highlight one experience that really impacted her, Emily wrote:

*“The program officer intervened when one of the **young mothers** become so ill she could no longer function. Staff took her to the hospital. She had no family to take care of her baby while she was so ill. The social development office refused to take responsibility for her wee son as there is no foster home and the hospital had no reason to admit the baby. Hospitalization requires you bring someone to care for you. After much convincing, the hospital allowed the baby to stay with his mother if Help Lesotho and community members cared for him and covered expenses until his mother passed away or recovered.*

I spent many days over two months with the baby in hospital, feeding and playing with him. It was clear his social development was regressing despite our best efforts. By the time his mother recovered from the liver toxicity that resulted from taking ARVs without enough protein, the baby boy had gone blind from malnourishment either in the womb or in hospital.

This young mother tried to do right by her child in taking her ARVs but almost died without enough to eat. AIDS had deprived her of a family to guide her through pregnancy or postnatal care once she became ill. The medical system is too overwhelmed by AIDS orphans to care for him. At just 5 months, this blind, adorable baby boy already has overcome so many more challenges because he was born in a nation in the grips of HIV/AIDS.”

Marie-Claire responded to the same question with:

One of the most profound experiences I had was an encounter with a very brave man who was HIV positive. One day as I walk home from work, I met the brother of a friend. He beckoned me closer. “You work with Help Lesotho,” he says. “Yes,” I respond. I see him looking at my red Help Lesotho bracelet.

“You are the people who talk about AIDS.” “We do.”

"I am one of those people. I am one of those people with HIV," he says.

I'm caught off guard, not shocked that he has HIV (roughly one in four people are HIV positive in Lesotho), but surprised that he stated his status so frankly and to a stranger no less. HIV/AIDS stigmas still persist in Lesotho and it remains rare for someone to volunteer their status.

"Thank-you for sharing that with me," I recover.

He goes on to tell me his story. His wife died from AIDS when their children were still young. He made the difficult decision to leave his children with his mother to get a security guard job to pay for his children's schooling. He tells me life is hard: He is sick. He is away from his family. He misses his deceased wife.

"But I am not afraid," He tells me. "My children...they do not have HIV. I am living to give them a better life."

For me, my encounter with him was a lesson in resilience and meaning. He bravely fights to live in spite of everything thrown at him. If he can live his life with hope in spite of so many obstacles, then surely I could traverse challenges of the development in the field. It takes many hands, hearts and intentions to do such work here."

As we work together, we all struggle, learn and grow. Some days the challenges seem daunting but overall – each one of us believes **IT IS POSSIBLE** to do outstanding work here and be a centre of excellence! It is happening every day!

Winter-Spring 2014 – Letter #3

Greetings to you all,

It is raining as I write. This is our fourth day without water in this particular stretch and the irony is that it has rained more this month than I can ever remember.

As a funny aside, we are the only organization of any size in Lesotho with its head office in the field so we are not typically present for 'schmoozing opportunities' in the big city. You will laugh to know that I went to a black tie affair by myself in the capital with nothing to wear but my best traditional Seshoeshoe dress and my one pair of heels. When I arrived in the room of 150 people, I was the **ONLY** one in Seshoeshoe! Whoops!

I have some sad news to share. The young mother mentioned in my last letter with the blind baby died last week. Maternal mortality is brutally high here. Our staff are still trying to support the little one – such a tragedy.

A young girl arrived at the office today. Both her parents died recently from AIDS, leaving her to stay with a cousin. Two days ago, the cousin kicked her out – not wanting to be 'contaminated by AIDS', forcing this beautiful child of around eleven, to sleep in the fields. Someone sent her to us.

Last weekend we trained 120 teen leaders in our school Anti-AIDS Clubs to facilitate sessions independently at their schools. Sustainable development is providing the context and conditions for people to solve their own problems. We will guide and monitor them, but it is clear that they are keen to be of value to their peers and to their schools.

I met a young man I have known since 2005. He was head of his household, a ‘double orphan’ as they say here. He lost his way – leaving school, becoming disengaged and depressed. In the midst of his three page letter to me he tried to explain: *“I was living in hell. There was no time to read my notes and study like the other students as I had to look after my younger brother and sister. I had to do all the family work. I don’t know where I belong. Maybe I belong to you guys. My life was covered with shame, I am still shameful. I am so glad that you welcomed me back. You have been my mother since I was a boy. I promise I will do better and make something of myself – despite my mistakes and my sorrows.”*



I had a lovely visit with a 40 year-old single parent of a 16 year old sponsored child with the most beautiful smile. Her daughter gets first class grades in school – which is a miracle here. They live in a one room concrete house partitioned for a curtained sleeping area. She works in the factory in Maputsoe making jeans for companies such as Gap and Levi’s, 5-7 days a week for ~\$100 CAD a month. She is smart as a whip and a peer AIDS educator among her fellow factory workers. She pays ~ \$35 CAD/month for transport, leaving \$65 for food, clothes, household items, school fees, toiletries, etc. for herself and her three children. Her gratitude for the sponsorship one of you provides for her daughter was humbling. I so admired her.

I hope this is not too much detail but it is really revealing how important our work is.

We did a 5-day **Out-Of-School Youth Training** with 107 aspiring peer educators chosen for leadership potential by the local community councils in two small villages in Thaba Tseka. Our staff had to traverse a challenging river to reach one village in the mountains. Many participants were single or double orphans living in impoverished households. Many had only attended primary school; others were herd boys who spent the majority of their lives isolated from the community looking after cattle and sheep. Much of the information in the intensive training on HIV/AIDS, anatomy, reproductive health, decision making, self-esteem and sexual abuse was new to them. Most had never seen a condom. Given the remoteness of the villages, some chiefs and villagers were terrified and resistant as we challenged unhealthy myths about HIV and AIDS. Of the 28 who tested, 20 did so for their first time. One 23 year-old father testing for the first time discovered he was HIV positive. He said that if it were not for the training’s emphasis on how to continue to live a meaningful life with HIV or AIDS, he would have committed suicide.

When we assessed the impact using pre and post surveys:

- Only 40% of women and 50% of men knew it was possible to contract HIV the first time you have sex;
- 87% of females and 43% of males believed not having sex would make you sick (post training: 7% of males and females still held that belief);
- Before training, 43% of women and 27% of men believed women could not get pregnant while menstruating (after training 7% of women and 22% of men still agreed with the statement);
- Before training, 60% of women and 43% of men had heard of Multiple Concurrent Partners (MCPs) but only 40% of women and 27% of men understood what that meant. Once understood, the majority indicated that they had MCPs. Post training, the % of participants who understood that having MCPs greatly increased the risk of contracting HIV rose from 70% to 90% for women and 77% to 90% for men;
- In the pre-survey, most participants believed that it was okay for men to be violent towards women; post training results reported that only 10% found this acceptable.

At the conclusion of our last **Young Mother's Program**, these previously fragile young women held a public gathering to tell the chiefs, local councillors, villagers and friends what they had learned and how they had grown. THEN, they asked the assembly to support them and their babies and told them exactly how they needed support. They asked for support meetings and protection from community harassment and discrimination because they were single and had babies.

After hearing from each mother, community leaders were given a chance to talk to them. One chief from Ha Tlaitlai village publicly encouraged the young mothers. He applauded Help Lesotho for appreciating the most underprivileged people in their community. Reserve Chief Retselisitsoe gave a standing ovation to Help Lesotho for taking an initiative to involve them in this. He offered some of his land so that young mothers could grow vegetables to sell; a great gesture indeed.

It is a real challenge from this side to provide you with enough detail to understand the impact of your donations and yet not so much that it is overwhelming. 10,000 beneficiaries every year is a lot of people!

Every day is a testimonial to the good in human nature, to the delight that learning and growth brings, and to the stability that a healing heart experiences.

Thank you – from each and every one of us.

Salang hantle

Peg



Winter-Spring 2014 – Letter #4



Khotsong (*peace/hello to you all*),

There is a fall nip in the air these days – especially in the early mornings. March is a lovely time of year here. Fields are resplendent with purple and pink cosmos flowers. The mountain slopes seem softer in the muted light of late summer. Even a few trees are changing colour, defying what we think of when picturing an African climate.

In my last letter, I described a little girl who came to the office with nowhere to go. That evening, our staff called the Child Protection Unit to report her abuse by the cousin. They managed to contact her grandfather who walked the entire night to get here by the morning. I insisted on meeting the grandfather myself. He seemed a lovely man. He has taken her to his village to live. We hope to follow her progress. She is such a beautiful, yet vulnerable child. It was touching when a couple of readers offered to sponsor her. Thank you for that – we were all delighted. Although this child has found a home and support, there are so many others who need sponsorship and I hope you will consider helping another girl – just like her.



We live in hope of expanding our **Young Mothers Program**. Many participants were orphaned in the height of the AIDS pandemic and are now of childbearing age. They have grown up in poverty and many are illiterate, leaving school in grade 1 or 4 or 6 to take care of households, look after sick relatives, or manage chores. Because they were not in school, they lack the socialization and education to know how to navigate life. They lack the confidence that comes from achievements and structured learning. Their illiteracy prevents them from knowing what medicines to take and when, how to access resources, and how to seek help for their babies.

They need support processing information and transferring it to their lives. So many are incredibly stressed and most often depressed.

Many of the girls are immobilized by shame and poverty ---shame at being illiterate, at having a baby so young or out-of-wedlock, at being so dependent upon others for survival. Shame holds them back from attending the clinics for pre- and post-natal care lest they be chastised by the nurses and other patients. In the whole area of Pitseng there are no free contraceptive services.

One is shocked by the Lesotho stats that in the 15-24 age range, 50% of girls have HIV or AIDS! In the present group of 86 girls and young mothers, eight have died since January 1 of AIDS related complications. It is truly unbelievable.

As part of our program, one young mother per region is trained to be a support right in the village. **Young Mother Leads** do one-on-one home visits, track how babies and mothers are doing, reinforce pre- and post-natal care, deliver information about nutrition, etc. A key task of the Leads is to support the women to build a village network. The young women lack basic cooperative and team skills to work together – these are skills they would have learned if they had been to school or been raised in functioning families. We now teach these skills separately and carefully so they can learn to support each other without such defensiveness. Thus, training on cooperative learning and group dynamics is critical to the success of the village networks – which are in turn needed for program sustainability. These networks will go on long after the women complete the program.

We started this as a two month program and have now expanded it to six months, knowing full well it needs to be at least a year. So much needs to be done, such as providing babysitting during the sessions so that the mothers can concentrate. We need to incorporate literacy development for both mother and child. Participants must learn to eat food, especially protein, when taking their AIDS drugs or the drugs will eat their stomachs. Yet there is no food in the house! They are starving. Many come to training because food is served. They need to learn how to grow food for themselves and get the seeds to do so, to understand nutrition and hygiene, family planning, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, and concepts of early child development. The trainings really do foster hope and optimism, and their self esteem really does increase, but yet, they go home to family members and partners who abuse them emotionally and physically. We have learned that the partners and husbands need to be involved in the trainings from time to time so they are not so threatened– for their safety and for that of the children.

For example, yesterday, I held a young orphaned girl of 14 who has lost her beloved grandmother, leaving four girls (14,16,18,22) and 2 babies to live on CAD\$10/mo from the government. She worries all the time about helping her family. The 22 year old has two children and some mental health challenges. Without this program I do not know how this group of girls could manage at all.

We are finding that more of the grannies have HIV or AIDS and are on treatment compared to previous sessions. I suspect it is the younger ones but am not sure. I am trying to find out.



'M'e Felleng, our Grandmother Support Officer, returned from Thaba Tseka and reports that the groups are doing very well. They are such champions of the program – these grannies just love it. Now they are able to do things on their own. In September (spring), your funds bought them fresh seeds for their gardens. Enough seeds and more rain than usual have produced abundance for the first time in years. Many will have enough vegetables to preserve and some to sell—truly a great relief and blessing.

Help Lesotho has also partnered with Habitat for Humanity to build 40 pit latrines and do 10 house repairs for the grannies in Thaba Tseka. They are overjoyed. All this in the context that the **Old Age Security grants** have just been increased to M500 a month effective April 1 – about \$50 a month!

The Basotho are a remarkable people – how they keep going on is a miracle and an inspiration.

Thank you for walking this journey with us!

PS the next letter is my last from this trip as I prepare to return to frigid Ontario. I have some exciting news – stay tuned!

Winter-Spring 2014 – Letter #5

Khotsong (peace/hello to you all),

Heading home to Canada after six weeks in Lesotho, I am reflecting on the last ten years, since my first trip in August 2004. As I chat with former beneficiaries and visit our schools and projects, I think of all the work of so many hands and hearts and the incredible support we have had. I never imaged so many wonderful people would be willing to help orphans, girls, youth and grandmothers they would never meet in a country they had never heard of. It feeds my faith in human nature and I try never to take such compassion and generosity for granted.

I have so much confidence in the next ten years. We have just renewed the contract of our Country Director, Ntate Shadrack Mutembei, a truly outstanding leader, for another three years. We are blessed to have him. We have built a dedicated, hard working staff team in both countries who, with our beneficiaries, are our best advocates of the impact of our programs.

HELP US CELEBRATE OUR 10TH ANNIVERSARY!

Celebrate the success and ensure the future!

We have been working on this since last June and now I finally get to tell you what we have planned!



OUR THEME: CELEBRATING GIRLS AND WOMEN

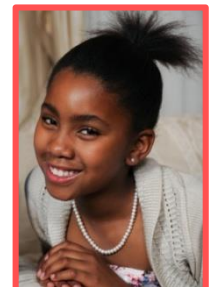
Since 2004, our work with girls and women, grannies and young mothers has been extraordinary – now reaching 7,500 girls and women (¾ of our 10,000 beneficiaries) every year. We will celebrate the success and potential of investing in girls and women.

The focus is on raising funds and awareness of our vision to create a critical mass of women who can stand up for themselves and advocate for the rights of women and children in Lesotho. To achieve this, it is essential to continue to involve boys and men in our plans and programs. We are in this together. As Desmond Tutu so passionately put it; *“We men have made a mess of things. I want a world run by women!. ... Until I can have a world run by women, I want male leaders to do more for equality for girls and women”*.

CANADA DECEMBER 2014



We are excited that **HER ROYAL HIGHNESS, QUEEN MASENATE OF LESOTHO** will come to Canada for our celebrations. Her Majesty and I have known each other for years. In our recent meeting, she was so enthusiastic about coming to meet our donors and to discuss issues around gender equity and the impact of our programs in Lesotho. We will send you invitations to the various events, receptions and other opportunities for Her Majesty to meet you.



She and His Majesty have graciously agreed to allow their eldest child, **PRINCESS SENATE** to accompany her mother to Canada to honour the theme of **Celebrating Girls and Women**. The Princess will be thirteen by December, and is looking forward to visiting schools and meeting Canadian children.

For the first time ever, we have invited a Basotho grandmother and teenage girl to come to Canada to tell their stories and meet many of the people who enable Help Lesotho to exist. Finally, you will have the opportunity to hear directly from our beneficiaries. One of my tasks this trip was to chose the grandmother and girl who would come. They are so excited – you can imagine!

How you can help: We are seeking donations of Airmiles/Aeroplan miles to bring the Basotho grandmother and girl to Canada. If you can help, either with the travel miles or with donations for their other expenses, please let us know info@helplesotho.org.

There are many opportunities for you to volunteer, corporately sponsor an event, donate a major auction item (week at your cottage, villa in France, etc.??) etc. Please contact us with your ideas or inquiries.

LESOTHO MARCH 2015



HIS MAJESTY, KING LETSIE III has kindly agreed to be the patron of our Lesotho celebrations which will be held in conjunction with International Women's Day 2015. We will host a major celebration event for around 1,000 beneficiaries, local officials, and partner organizations – I am already dreaming of the beautiful singing and dancing!

The incredible **RAY ZAHAB** from **IMPOSSIBLE2POSSIBLE**

(<http://impossible2possible.com>) has agreed to come to Lesotho with a youth expedition to do a run through the spectacular Lesotho mountains to **Celebrate Girls And Women**. His passion is education and they are keen to support the theme of gender equity. Simon Fraser University will develop educational modules on gender equity for the experiential learning component of the project. Ray and his youth team will run through the mountains and visit several of our twinned schools along the way – it will be amazing. Lesotho is gorgeous in March with the cosmos blooming and the terrain respondent in vegetation. The expedition will connect electronically with schools around the world (including some of our partner schools in Canada!) to raise awareness. Ray tells me 25K to 50K more people will learn of our work through this partnership!



As I write, our Basotho staff committee is planning numerous gender advocacy activities throughout the year as part of the leadership component of our programs. We will have girls, young mothers, young men and women and grandmothers from our programs taking important leadership roles throughout the year culminating in our March celebrations.

We will also host our first ever **Ambassador's Trip**, a donor initiative to bring a small group of people to Lesotho to both participate in activities and help us increase our network upon their return. We are asking for a very large donation for this opportunity; if you are interested in more information, please let me know.

You will receive more detailed information as we go along but I am so happy to finally share our plans with you. I sincerely hope you will join us to make our 10th Anniversary an incredible celebration. I leave Lesotho with the conviction that you would be so proud of what has been accomplished in the last ten years and confident that, with your support, we will significantly increase the depth and influence of our programs in the future.

Stay tuned and join us in making a huge difference in the lives of people in Lesotho and maybe our own as well!

Best wishes,

Peg