

LESEDI PRIMARY SCHOOL

October 2018

Graeme and I have just arrived home after spending a couple of weeks with Benson, combining a few days at Lesedi with a self-drive safari exploring Hwange National Park.

As always, our time at Lesedi has been wonderful and memorable. It is a privilege to witness first hand the steady transformation of the school from its humble beginnings. I hope my occasional trip reports provide an insight into the progress being made as a result of the incredible support we have received over the past few years.

There is much to share but I will start with the challenge of the water crisis. A generous donation at the start of the Lesedi project enabled us to connect the fledgling school to the mains water supply. As the school has grown, the water requirements have steadily increased. With 189 pupils plus teachers and support staff, a large amount of water is used each day for drinking, cooking, washing and ablutions. In addition, water is also needed for our various construction projects. The water supply has always been erratic, but the installation of two water tanks at Lesedi has minimized any problems.

Unfortunately, the situation has worsened considerably during the past couple of months. The supply is now either non-existent or just a trickle from the tap. The supply



pipe runs from Victoria Falls town to the new airport, which is considerably larger than the original airport. The small asbestos supply pipe (the smaller of the two pipes in the image) is now totally inadequate to cope with increased demand from the airport. Last week the water company cut all connections from the mains pipe to improve the supply to the airport, resulting in rural communities in this area now having very limited access to water. We have been assured that the connection to Lesedi has been left slightly open, but this only provides an occasional trickle of water.

The water crisis means that all construction at Lesedi has been suspended and Benson or family members spend a few hours every 2-3 days towing a water bowser into town to fill up, inevitably joining a long queue at the single tap. The water is then delivered to school and provides enough supply for a couple of days. On our last day at school the water ran out and Benson's arrival with the bowser was met by some very thirsty children who eagerly filled their drinking cups direct from the bowser.



Although we expect the mains water supply to be restored at some stage, probably once the rains start, we need access to a reliable supply as a back-up. We have decided to drill a borehole in a gully 2km from the school. We anticipate having to drill to a depth of around 120 metres to provide a reliable supply. The water will then need to be pumped up hill to the school. If all goes well the borehole will be drilled in the coming weeks, enabling resumption of construction before the year-end. This is additional expense that we could have done without given the expenditure required on the clinic but to gain access to a reliable water supply is essential.

On a more positive note, the school itself is thriving. My last visit was only six months ago but the progress since then is very noticeable. Our sponsorship program is proving successful with 65 children already sponsored and a further 21 awaiting sponsorship. We have established a welfare fund to cover the cost of school fees during the period between a child being identified as needing sponsorship and a sponsor being found, so that they aren't excluded from school. The introduction of the sponsorship program is already having a huge impact on the children we are helping. Most will have expected their education to be very limited and now find they have an unexpected opportunity to learn and potentially lead a different life than the subsistence lifestyle and grinding poverty of their parents. I was touched to hear the sponsor children proudly refer to sponsors as their special friends. The non-sponsorship pupils are rather envious!



Some of our sponsorship pupils in class

During my last trip I supplied some basic sports equipment to the school and spent a few days with Benson creating a table tennis table from scrap metal and making netball posts. More recently guests donated a volleyball net. I was really thrilled to see that the children are using all this equipment regularly. The water crisis has temporarily curtailed the sports lessons but otherwise netball, football (soccer), volleyball, badminton and table tennis are played regularly, with children pleading for racquets and balls after school. From next year the school plans to enter teams into inter-school competitions. The teachers kindly arranged for a few hours of sports during our visit and we were totally blown away by the energy, enthusiasm and competitiveness of the sports teams and their cheering supporters. These children are unrecognizable from the ones who started at Lesedi just a few short years ago.



On a less cheerful note, an experience on our final day painfully reinforced the need for a clinic at Lesedi. A 4-year old girl called Gracious Ngwenya was enrolled in our pre-school class at the start of the year. When she stopped attending school in the 2nd term, the teachers made enquiries and realized the family were in financial difficulties. Gracious was then added to our sponsorship program (although as yet we haven't found a sponsor for her) and returned to school a couple of weeks ago. The teachers were shocked to find that when Gracious reappeared at school she was extremely malnourished with a swollen stomach, indicative of kwashiorkor. The teachers took



over responsibility for her diet and she initially showed some signs of improvement. However last week she deteriorated, and the teachers insisted that the mother take Gracious to a doctor, assuring her that the school would cover the costs. Unbelievably the doctor at a private clinic in town diagnosed wind and prescribed anti-acids.

I was really touched to hear that the teachers personally funded the purchase of some special nutritious food for Gracious over the weekend and on Monday eagerly awaited her arrival at school. When Gracious failed to arrive, the teachers contacted her mother and discovered that she had become seriously ill over the weekend. They

immediately called Benson and we drove to the homestead, to find a child who was clearly close to death. She was limp, struggling to breathe and whimpering in pain. The mother had removed Gracious's dress to wash her and the sight reminded me of pictures on the news of starving children during the famine in Somalia. Truly horrifying. Benson took charge of the situation and rushed Gracious and her mother to the best clinic in Vic Falls where she was immediately seen by a doctor, who confirmed how serious the situation was. Later that day we returned to the clinic to hear that tests had identified very high blood sugar levels. As her condition had remained untreated over a long period, there had been a catastrophic impact on the poor girl's body that cannot be quickly reversed.

At the time of writing Gracious has been in hospital for 4 days and although she is thankfully much brighter, the doctor is still struggling to get her blood sugar under control. He is not sure how he can send her home at this stage and has concerns over the challenges of long-term monitoring, special diet and daily insulin injections. With the family living in a simple mud hut and struggling to feed themselves, the conditions are far from ideal.

This terrible experience again reinforced the need for a clinic to serve this community. Medical issues are inevitably ignored until there is an emergency, and even then the community too often assume (often rightly) that a consultation and treatment will be too expensive. They will either call in a local healer or not seek any medical intervention. To have a local clinic which is accessible to the community, allowing conditions to be identified at a much earlier stage will be life-changing.

When we started fundraising for the clinic we knew it was something we needed to achieve but were overwhelmed by the costs involved. We were aware that the wonderful support we have received for the school may not be translated into

donations for a clinic. However yet again we have been humbled by the generosity from many of our supporters. We have received several substantial donations and just a few days ago were rendered speechless by an incredible \$50,000 donation from one of our regular safari guests. Whilst we still have some way to go to reach our target for the clinic, nurses' cottages and expectant mothers' shelter, this remarkable donation means that we can proceed in earnest with construction once the water supply is resolved. We don't have sufficient words to express our gratitude.

We have always been very proud of the teachers and support staff at Lesedi but under the leadership of our school principal, Mrs Mutori, the team is going from strength to strength. The teachers have become surrogate parents for each of their pupils and take their welfare extremely seriously. They have all bonded as a strong team and were thrilled with the Lesedi t-shirts we delivered, which they are planning to wear on the Lesedi equivalent of "dress-down" Fridays.



Graeme and I with our fabulous teachers



Lesedi handicrafts

Another exciting development is that the teachers and pupils have started to make some handicrafts for sale to tourists visiting the school, most notably bead necklaces and bracelets. This is proving very popular and the profits are used to provide a few small extras for the school and pupils. In a community with few role models and limited employment, it is a very valuable example of entrepreneurship for the children. The teachers chose to use some of the profits from bead sales to pay for the initial medical consultation and tests for Gracious. We are as inspired by the teachers as we are by our supporters!

Graeme has now taken over handling the finances for the Ngoko Charitable Trust so was keen to get an update on the school financial position during our visit. The charity currently covers the cost of five teachers' salaries plus school internet, along with all the construction projects. Most of the other day to day running costs are covered by

the school out of the \$10 per child per term school fees. The remaining \$24 per term of school fees is spent on food supplies for the two meals cooked for the children each day.

Before our visit we were aware that the school was struggling, given the currency issues in Zimbabwe. In recent years Zimbabwe has used the US Dollar, since the abolition of their own currency. However, a shortage of notes led them to introduce dollar bond notes which were supposed to trade at par value with the US Dollar. Inevitably the value of the bond notes has fallen, and each dollar now trades at half the value of the US Dollar on the black market. The cost of buying food, uniforms and other provisions for the pupils has doubled in recent weeks, as suppliers are obliged to accept dollar bond notes in lieu of US Dollars, whilst school fees have remained static.

The wider situation is increasingly difficult with shortages of fuel and staple goods. As most people are paid in bond notes, even when goods are available they can no longer afford the highly inflated prices.

We anticipated having to assist financially during this time of crisis, however we were extremely impressed by the considerable efforts of the school to manage the situation without seeking additional help. The school covers the wages of the school secretary, cooks and caretaker, along with monthly bills for electricity and water (which are still charged despite the lack of water!). They also cover the travel costs for the regular meetings the teachers are required to attend, along with ad hoc costs such as the \$450 they must now pay to set up a school website for use by the Ministry of Education!

Our salary costs will soon be increasing as we will add a Grade 5 class from the start of next year, so an additional teacher will be needed. We have also decided to appoint one extra teacher to cover for Mrs Mutori as necessary. In addition to teaching Grade 4, she is kept very busy with headteacher duties. We are hoping to find a teacher with special needs experience as they can then work with those pupils needing extra assistance in classes. Most of our classes are at a capacity of up to 30-35 pupils, which is higher than we would like but it is difficult to turn away a child who wouldn't otherwise receive an education. Given the wide range of ability levels of our pupils, an extra teacher will be hugely beneficial and a good investment of resources.

Other than the clinic we have several other projects ongoing. Our fourth classroom block is nearing completion and thanks to a very generous donation from a couple who recently visited Lesedi, we have converted our ablution block to flush toilets and added sinks. This will become the girls' toilets and a separate block is being built for the boys. Unfortunately, the water crisis has temporarily halted construction, but we will hopefully be back on track very soon.

Our other big challenge is the internet service at the school. Despite paying over \$150 per month the existing service has proved virtually unusable. We will be investigating other options over the coming weeks and may need to agree a much higher monthly cost in order to secure faster speeds and uncapped data.

I will end by reiterating that despite the difficulties, Lesedi is continuing its remarkable development thanks to the generosity of our supporters, the commitment of our teachers and of course Benson's tireless hard work and dedication. Many of our pupils face considerable challenges and have had a tough start in life, however they are thriving in this new environment. It amused us to see that the children hang around school for as long as possible at the end of each school day. Eventually the teachers insist on them going home!

Thank you for being part of the Lesedi family and for making this extraordinary school (and future clinic) possible. Together we are changing lives for the better. Not so long ago I thought we were making a difference by providing an education. Now I realise that the impact is much greater and that Lesedi provides so much more. It is truly remarkable to be a small part of this and I hope that by reading this you can share something of what I am feeling. As always, I have left a piece of my heart at Lesedi.

Until next time...some photos to enjoy...



Grade 4 with teacher (and school principal) Mrs Mutori



Grade 3 with teacher Mr Ndlovu



Grade 2 with teacher Ms Ncube



Grade 1 with teacher Mrs Nyoni



Lesedi "Babies" in our pre-school classes ECD B (above) and ECD A (below) with teachers Mrs Mpofu and Ms Ngwenya



And to finish off this rather lengthy report, a few bonus photos for those of you who read to the end:



Perhaps not quite the recommended golf posture?



Launching a kite (avoiding the electricity pylons!!)



Badminton in our new classroom block



Fun on the swings