

# **“Thank You For Making Us Believe We Are Important.”**

Lesedi Secondary, Hazel Musayihwevhu, Form 2

## **Lesedi School: Introduction 1.0**

In 2019 our Ngoko Safaris guide (who happens to be Benson’s son, Honest) dragged Russell and me through a quick stopover at Lesedi on our way to the bush. It was our first time there. And, we vowed, our last. We already supported a nonprofit school in the US, so this was a stop we would not have agreed to had we been asked.



I could claim we were too polite to nix it.

But, truth be told, we harbor a strong sense of self-preservation. Not gonna potentially rankle the dude who’s supposed to stand between us and lions on the prowl for a bush-novice snack. Or a naive croc who bought into that line, “they taste like chicken.”

## **Introduction 2.0**

A month later, when we were back home, we got curious. A dig through online historical data gave us the 2014 lowdown on Lesedi’s humble beginnings. One teacher. Overseeing 24 learners. In an open-air tin-roofed “classroom” hunkered atop a dirt field. Furnished with basic supplies.



We also found info about “future plans”. They read like one delusional Zimbabwean (Benson) and two uncharacteristically optimistic number-crunching Brits (Fiona & Graeme) sitting around a safari campfire with a jug of moonshine on a full moon night, playing a game of “What’s the most outrageously impossible thing we might attempt to do? In our spare time?”



In light of our detour with Honest we had to ditch our cynical skepticism. These guys weren’t kidding around.

By the end of 2019, Lesedi had morphed into a school (a REAL school!!) with enough real classrooms/equipment/supplies to accommodate 240 learners, ECD-A through Grade 6.

OK, fine. We decided to give two sisters a better shot at readin’, ‘ritin’, and ‘rithmetic.

## Voilà! A Baker's Dozen

Our initial sponsorship commitment was born of the belief that “every kid ought to be able to read and count to ten.” Even—or perhaps most especially—kids whose day-to-day existence is built on the kinds of obstacles that would derail most of us. Acute hunger. Family instability. (For starters.)

Subsequent comprehensive Trip Reports galvanized us to consider an expansion of our sponsorship headcount. Should we offer to as many kids as we can the opportunity to ***be the best version of themselves?***

*Seems like a pretty consequential legacy for two golden-agers like us to leave behind.*

But Russell and I are not naïve about world affairs. Zimbabwe faces innumerable and some possibly insurmountable challenges. So after Lesedi twanged our heartstrings we checked in with our heads. We considered ROI/bang-for-the-buck and debated whether it made sense to put our chips on this particular table and roll the dice on kids whose futures look so precarious.

Ultimately our decision boiled down to three audacious visionaries, the 007s of education. Logically, they had less chance of wrenching a first-rate school from the raw infertile soil in Zimbabwe than James Bond had of befriending Blofeld's cat.

So. We didn't bet on Zimbabwe. We didn't bet on individual kids. Our money (quite literally speaking) is on a trio of mad, idealistic magicians, and the support team they've assembled. Every day they demonstrate their ability to conjure something invaluable out of nothing much at all. We feel privileged to help them.



Graeme, Benson, Fiona  
The Masterminds



Mrs Mutori  
Management Maestro

Fast forward from 2019 (our first peek at Lesedi) to today. We now sponsor a brood of thirteen fledglings-and-teenyboppers, age range 4-15. Our **Team 13**.

And can't wait for each End of Term when we know their letters are on the way. We cherish every hand-drawn pic from the young'uns, and the basic “I am fine. How are you?” comms from the less creative. In letters where we find them, we track details of day-to-day-life. Our hearts swell at the rare few who bravely declare their future ambitions. Like being a commercial airplane pilot. “*Is there an airport in New York City? I would like to fly my airplane there.*” Or aim to be a car mechanic. “*I want to work on BMWs.*” (He once rode in one.)

Many of their letters end with a wish that we will visit Lesedi so they can meet us in person. But seriously, what interest could they truly have in a couple of old white wrinklies who would be as alien to them as rap is to Beethoven-loving Russell?

## A “Non-Safari” Return to Zimbabwe Was Not on Our Bucket List

As retirees taking advantage of our “If not now, when?” decade, Russell and I are working our way through not-yet satisfied hankerings. As much as we value the opportunity to help our Team 13 discover—and construct—the early rungs of their own life-ladders (and value it we do!), we had no plans for an in-person with the kiddos.



But then Covid left us with soon-to-expire AirLink flight credits so we shrugged a *might as well ...* and set off for in-person smiles-and-handshakes with the Team. (Aka, **Introduction 3.0**)

### **Whoa. Weren't Expecting That.**

First Surprise? We were greeted by the Deputy Principal with our nine Primary students in tow. Backed up by a chorus line of their peers who welcomed us with elaborate songs (in English!), followed by an indigenous dance demonstration.



Next we were shepherded to Secondary where we were introduced to our other four sponsees, and entertained by their classmates with a choral presentation topped off by a series of performances by talented marimba musicians.



When the music stopped, with everyone still gathered around us, the spotlight turned to Hazel, a Form 2-er who expressed the school's gratitude.

*Welcome to you, Elaine and Russell.*

*Thank you for visiting us today.*

*We thank you for supporting Lesedi School.*

*Thank you for all you do to provide us the opportunity to get an education.*

*Thank you for helping to build our classrooms and buy supplies and equipment.*

*Thank you for helping us have good teachers.*

*Thank you for making us believe we are important.*

*Thank you for caring about us.*

***"Thank you for making us believe we are important."***

Wow. At that point I was discreetly dabbing tears and Russell, an accomplished public speaker and archetypical stiff upper lipped Brit (albeit naturalized), found himself unable to express the words vivid in his thoughts. About how much those kids give to us in return, rather than just us giving to them. He feared the words wouldn't make it past the lump in his throat.

We were deeply moved. We were humbled. We are honored that the fates have put us on these kids' life-path. And they on ours.

(And grateful that we had those dang AirLink credits sitting there tapping their fingers.)

## Getting to Know You

After the welcoming ceremonies we headed to the Primary School computer lab to spend an hour with the Team 13 Primaries. (Ages 4-10, plus one Special Ed 13-yr-old.) Each presented us with a computer-made *Welcome!* card. (Created with *biig* assists from teachers.)

The kids made their best attempt to “converse”. But at that age their English is shaky. (We suspect our accents—US/Brit—jumbled even the words they thought they knew.)

They seemed curious about us. Not surprisingly, many were tongue-tied-shy. *But aha!*

Experienced and adept at long-distance grandparenting we know how to break the ice with moppets.

We had brought for each a small personalized book bag, with a pencil case tucked inside.



Bags & cases were stuffed with basic everyday school supplies.

Now that's how ya stir up some kid-excitement!

And even get a few bear hugs as reward.

Then off to Secondary to spend time with Team 13's teens—two girls, two boys, ages 13-15. Their individual welcome cards were composed solely by them, in their own voices.

One student, whose track record of academic failures has, frankly, vexed us, wrote

***“We all have something within us that this world needs.”***

She signed it,

***WELCOME HOME!***

In person we got to see the quiet strength in this respectful, unassumingly confident young woman whose depth never came through in our numerous letter exchanges.

We were moved and gratified.



Our time with her shattered our presumptions about her and stilled our arrogant (fortunately *un*expressed) deprecations. A reminder of judgmental fallibility. And a well-deserved comeuppance.



During that first day, and half of the next, we were in various configurations with Team 13. They toured us through their classrooms at both Primary and Secondary. We met teachers whose effusive gratitude for our barely significant contributions both embarrassed us and inspired us to want to do more.

Everywhere we went kids with huge bright smiles shouted the kind of exuberant *Hello!* that's generally saved for rock stars and royalty. We came to understand that Lesedi is not only the place of their learning. For some, it provides their only nutritious meal. Or opportunity for healthcare. For others, it is their safe haven.

Only after dinnertime reflection were Russell and I able to articulate why their excitement and appreciation felt different than what we're accustomed to: There is no sense of the entitlement, conscious or un-, that is generally rife in Russell's and my Western experience. The Lesedi kids' gratitude is born of scarcity. And perilous need.

### **Moving Right Along ... The Non-Sexy Bit**

*Look what I helped build! I can see it with my own eyes!* Collectively, Lesedi supporters have:

- Constructed classroom blocks for 400+ learners, grades ECD-A through Form 2.
- Added four technical and vocational labs.
- Smoothed weeds into sports fields/punched water boreholes through clay/stocked a library and numerous classrooms with desks-chalkboards-books-supplies.

**Phase 1:** There's always that sexy, abracadabra excitement during the planning-and-implementation of an insanely ambitious startup like Lesedi. *Whew! We're almost at the end of it!*

You'd think there'd be time to kick back and celebrate. But no. Gotta move right into the stage that will determine continued success ... or failure.

**Phase 2:** Fortifying the critical but boring, behind-the-scenes, day-to-day foundational support and maintenance. Without that, it's all been for naught.

### **Sustainability. The next challenge.**

Russell, whose "for-profit world" career was followed by nonprofit leadership, better understands the unsexy bit that Graeme and Fiona wrangle with every hectic day and every sleepless night: keeping all the balls in the air, all the plates spinning at the end of their vertical sticks. Maintaining a flow of hard-earned credits that cover spreadsheet columns of debits. Teachers/staff salaries. Nonstop demand for reams of Maths and Writing exercise books. Pencils, pens and toilet roll by the gross. School uniforms, healthy meals, vaccinations. Solar panels and water pumps and computers to repair. And myriad other necessities, new ones making themselves known every day.

On the afternoon of Day 2, while I was out being schooled in organic farming by animated and exceedingly proud Ag-project students (and their extraordinarily knowledgeable and experienced Ag guru) ...



... and learning how babies are born ...



... and how immunizations are updated,

Russell was standing under breeze-stirred shade trees asking Graeme: **“What keeps you awake at night?”**

Bottom line ...? It's the bottom line.

### **The Humdrum, No Fun, Keep-The-Show-On-The-Road Fund**

Ask B/G/F about the Lesedi donor base and the generosity of everyone whose support is nurturing the Lesedi dream into fruition and they become reverent—almost weepy—in their gratitude. From situations where three families pitch in to sponsor one child, to individual generosity that funded full classroom blocks.

Small gifts, large gifts—they're all equally valuable when an invoice hits the IN box. *Each and every* single C\$, £, €, AUD, \$ (or whatever) makes a difference.

Ask the Big Three (F/B/G) how much they worry about losing long-term, hard-working, dedicated and compassionate teachers (and other key staff) to whom they are desperate to give a long overdue salary increase. Ask them how much they stress about raising the \$20,000-plus *per month* that allows them to stay solvent at the most basic level (i.e., simply covering the bills) ...

It's an eye-opening conversation.

Russell willingly indulged my enthusiasm for providing seed money for some new Agriculture projects (yes, it's a pun). And I am equally onboard with his focus on providing a few restful minutes in nights of restless sleep.

We have already established a bequest; but Lesedi won't reap the benefits until The Reaper reaps us. So in the interim we have committed to a \$200/month contribution to **The Humdrum, No Fun, Keep-The-Show-On-The-Road Fund**.

Because as anyone with knowledge of how nonprofits survive will tell you ...

### **It's Not The Amount, It's The Consistency**

In our histories of salary and compensation, isn't it always the predictability—being able to trust that it will be there as expected—that is most important?

It is our great hope that everyone who shares our faith in and commitment to Lesedi's extraordinary success ... everyone who *is in a position to do so* ... will consider making a similar pledge, no matter if it's £2/month, or \$2000, or €50/month, or 400AUD/month, or C\$gazillion/month.

*No cheque is too small to cash.* Each and every contribution is invaluable. And greatly appreciated.

And if you find yourself with airline credits you don't know what to do with, why not head for an in-person Lesedi update? I guarantee they'll make you feel like royalty, you'll be blown away by the stunning progress you'll see firsthand, and you might just get your heartstrings twanged.

Oh, and ask if we happen to be around. An annual visit to Team 13 is now on our Bucket List. Hope to meet you there!

Elaine Taylor and Russell Leiman

(Written in first person for easier reading, definitely a team effort!)



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<https://lesedizim.org>

<https://www.facebook.com/lesedizim.org/>