

LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

December 2021

I am writing this year's trip report from a hotel room in London's Canary wharf on day 2 of our 11-day quarantine. And "I" this year is Graeme, having been entrusted with the pen by Fiona who is busy sorting out photos of the Lesedi kids on her laptop next to me.

We have both been desperate to return to Zimbabwe all year and jumped at the chance in late November to travel as soon as it was possible from the UK. We were there for 24 hours when suddenly Omicron was announced to the world and the UK tightened its borders again. After a 5 minute "Arrrrgghh..." panic we both just felt so relieved we had made it out to Lesedi when we did. We then enjoyed a very hectic but so worthwhile and enriching 11 days falling in love even further with Lesedi.

Stepping off the plane at Victoria Falls airport into the heat and anticipation is always a wonderful experience. Benson was waiting with his usual huge smile and heart. A short trip to Lesedi and we were home again. First impressions this time were just how beautiful it looked – the flowering plants at the school and clinic were in bloom and all the trees which Benson had so carefully preserved and nurtured makes Lesedi a cool oasis compared to the harsh sandy surroundings.



Lesedi Primary – a natural oasis, with shady seating areas and bird baths scattered around

The Lesedi staff and children were buzzing. There is always a real energy around the place. And lots of laughter. We don't laugh as much as we should do (certainly in the UK), and it really is the best medicine. Face masks were still being properly worn but that didn't stop the warm laughter and bright eyes welcoming us.

We had arrived at a momentous time for a whole variety of reasons, and it was wonderful for us to have the opportunity to help drive some of the big decisions in person rather than by the snatched WhatsApp messages that we normally resort to from the UK.

Let's start at the beginning with the primary school. We had arrived on the final day before the Grade 7 exams started, which would result in the ECDs and Grades 1-3 doing their schoolwork from home for the next two weeks, freeing up teachers for invigilating. All the home-based children were still able to collect lunch from the school gates each day, and as a treat could bring a younger sibling from home to eat with them. It shows the importance of our school feeding program that so many youngsters turned up each day clutching the hand of a baby sister or brother.

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As almost half the school was going to be absent for most of our time at Lesedi, this meant that Fiona had one morning to capture all 292 children on camera so that printed photos could be sent to sponsors. This is the thirteenth herculean task, requiring the perfect balance of light (not too sunny or too dark), equipment (150mm lens at full zoom), smiles (which vary from kids genuinely not knowing how to smile to some who could grace a Paris catwalk) and Fiona's skill (at this point Fiona corrects me: not so much skill but experience gained from a cumulation of previous painful mistakes). A long, brightly coloured yellow and brown caterpillar of excited kids wound its way up to the camera for their minute in the spotlight. Fiona four hours later happy but spent!

I was touring the classrooms. The desks were still socially distant, and masks were on (apart from when the camera appeared!), but it didn't stop the great interaction and sharing of knowledge between teacher and class. And the kids looked so smart – how they keep their one uniform and pair of shoes in such good condition in this tough environment is beyond me.



Socially distanced and hard at work

This was our first visit to Lesedi since the primary school covered the full rainbow of learning from ECD A to Grade 7. Nine years of growth and learning in front of our eyes. Reading the letters and cards to sponsors you really see the incremental growth in the children, both technically and expressively. The wonders of education and love.

While I was swanning around and Fiona was pressing the camera button, Benson was having a “normal” Benson day. Now for those who have met Benson you probably have some inkling of what this involves but for those who haven't had the pleasure it usually goes as follows: 4-5am wake up and WhatsApp to Mrs Mutori and others on plans for the day, 5am say good morning to the piggies at his homestead, 6am to 7pm a constant shuttle of chivvying builders, head into town to buy building materials, get hassled by someone, ferry 1,000 litres of water for builders, speak to someone in the village who wants help on something (as you are the one person in a 5km+ radius everyone comes to for help), make 50 phone calls and WhatsApps, do a bank trip to get some funds, sort an issue out on the farm, have a row with someone who hasn't delivered something, rinse and repeat..... Then hopefully a little breather and maybe a glass of wine on the deck then a phone call at 9pm – the lorry with 10,000 bricks for the secondary school is stuck, disaster, need to sort out etc (this happened three times in the 10 nights we were with him on our trip).

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If you plotted Benson's daily movement on GPS it would look like a 4-year-old's drawing of an explosion in a spaghetti factory. It is constant. I have been the CFO of two multi-billion pound companies but in plate spinning, stress and sheer output of getting things done, Benson is a world champion. We are all so lucky to have him leading the Lesedi dream.

Back to the primary school. Exams. Boy does Zimbabwe like exams. Before we arrived out, Grades 4-6 had just completed a whole set of year-end exams. The Grade 7 exams are in a league of their own. In the UK, 11-year-olds are tested on 3 subjects over 4-5 hours. In Zimbabwe, the same age kids do 11 papers over 2 weeks.

This is the first year that Lesedi has held Grade 7 exams, with our pioneer learners graduating from primary education this year. The school had jumped through a lot of official hoops to be registered as an examination centre, with the accreditation process culminating in installation of an impressive safe c1930s to securely hold the exam papers. Over the past couple of months, the teachers have invested a huge amount of extra work after formal classes finish each day, pulling together as a team to help the Grade 7s catch up from all the time (12 months+) lost due to covid lockdowns. The impact of covid on education is a global tragedy but in Africa with few home learning opportunities due to lack of internet, phones etc the tragedy is even more profound.



Lesedi Dining Hall repurposed as the Grade 7 exam room

The Grade 6 and 7 learners have all been supplied with solar lamps that they proudly showed us to allow them to do their homework in the dark. For most kids, homework comes after all the chores are done which generally seems to involve a lot of goat herding, fetching water, uniform washing and helping to prepare food. No Xbox or Playstation's here.

When we spoke to the Grade 7 learners and teachers after the first week of exams, they seemed to be going well. In the UK if you ask how a child got on in an exam, you are likely to get a fairly non-committal and pessimistic answer. Zimbabwe is beautifully on the opposite spectrum – “nailed it”, “38 out of 40” – as everyone bigs up their answer more than their friends! The teachers seem to be way more nervous than the pupils.

The only problematic exam paper (according to the Grade 7s) was due to the lockdown ban on sports. An examiner in Harare set a load of questions on Physical Education when schools across Zimbabwe

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have been unable to do any PE since April 2020, due to someone else in Harare saying no school sports allowed...

The Grade 7 exam results are due out before Christmas (although this may be an overly ambitious marking target) and at this stage we can only hope for the best. The national pass rate in 2020 was only 37% and there doesn't seem to be any account taken of the learners losing 12 months of education in lockdown. We will have to see but we are incredibly proud of all our Grade 7s, regardless of the outcome.

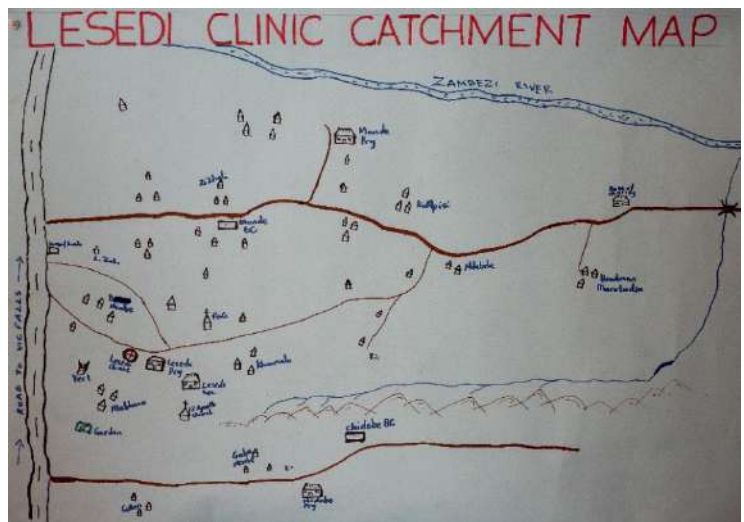
The teachers, nurses and support staff are incredibly committed to the Lesedi dream, and we thank them from the bottom of our hearts for all the effort, love and skill they pour into Lesedi. A special mention in dispatches to Mrs Mutori who continues to lead the school with so much care, wisdom and drive. We are sad to report that she lost her mother to covid when we were out there – I know you will join us in sending love and condolences to Mrs Mutori and her family at this difficult time.

Moving away from the primary school, another Lesedi project that we are just as proud of but don't shout about enough is the clinic. Since opening in March 2020, Sister Irene and the clinic team have been quietly running an extremely impressive operation and expanding their reach into the community.

The clinic now has a formal catchment area covering a strip of land stretching 14 kms from the main Vic Falls to airport road, where it meets the boundary of the next clinic which is 30 kms away.

According to the 2012 Zimbabwe census, the Lesedi Clinic catchment area has a population of 4,322, although the number will most likely be higher now due to the exodus from town.

The catchment area covers the communities of Chidobe, Monde, Ntabayengwe and Sizinda, serving a number of schools, including of course Lesedi. We have mentioned in the past some of the children who are receiving ongoing treatment from the clinic. You may



remember young Gracious who now attends the clinic three times each day for insulin injections and blood tests due to Type 1 diabetes. One day during our trip she was carried into the IT lab after a hypoglycemic attack and was swiftly and ably helped by the teachers. It is proving challenging to control her diabetes with the static insulin they have available in Zimbabwe. During school holidays it becomes even more difficult, as the parents don't have funds to buy the food she needs. You have to wonder about all the children with Type I diabetes and other medical conditions in rural areas across Zimbabwe who don't have access to the healthcare we can thankfully provide for Gracious.

One of the main developments since we were last in Zimbabwe 12 months ago is that the clinic is now approved to provide child immunisations as well as covid vaccinations.

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I was very ignorant of the child immunisation program in Zimbabwe. It is really impressive and run in partnership with the World Health Organisation and UNICEF. I was shown the vaccination records for a few of the community infants – they have 19 jabs by the time they are 18 months old. The clinic has been given an official vaccination fridge which is revered like an altar.

Going back to that first Friday, with Fiona still photographing the head of the caterpillar and Benson on task number 47 of the day, my swanning around got me to the clinic in time for the weekly child vaccinations. The clinic holds a vaccination clinic every Friday – a vial once opened can do 10 jabs but only lasts that day. At this week's clinic there were 7 mums with their 9 - 18 month toddlers waiting in the smart reception area, having a good natter and laugh while enjoying the coolness of their surroundings.

It was so endearing watching the babies as they set off on their journey. Firstly, Sister Irene explained to all the mums why the vaccines are important, what they do and how they are made. A visitor to the clinic that day was amazed we actually did this as it was the first time he had seen nurses taking the effort to educate the mums on this. You could see the babies think "ohh this is nice and cool, I'm enjoying this".

The babies then got weighed in a fun-looking harness weighing machine, their legs dangling as they enjoyed bouncing around "weee, this is great fun!"



They were then taken to get measured by Sami, one of the assistant nurses. Each baby was swaddled up and a tape measure stretched along them accompanied by a lot of laughter and giggling from Sami and the mum "mmm, not sure I like this. What's going to happen next?".

Then the piece de resistance moving next door to Sister Monica with her needle, vial, huge vaccination scroll and incredible laugh and big eyes. The unsuspecting victim still happy until the needle is expertly inserted, resulting in an immediate look of shock and then a big wail "mummy, why, why?". Two more jabs followed with increasing writhing by the baby before being whisked off home. "Another satisfied customer", said Sister Monica.

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Lesedi infant vaccination program

As well as the child immunisations, the clinic has been administering vast quantities of Sinovac covid vaccinations. Victoria Falls had been prioritised for vaccinations given the importance of the tourist dollar. Sister Irene confirmed that the majority of the community has now been double jabbed – an amazing achievement when I as a westerner look in total shame and embarrassment at how Africa yet again is left behind by those who can afford to assist and should know better (see <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-vaccine-tracker-global-distribution/>). Zimbabwe for once being a relatively positive colour on the map due to vaccine shipments from China.

The number of covid cases locally and nationally is unclear due to very limited testing. The main knock-on impact is on tourism. Virtually everyone in the Lesedi community is currently out of a job as there are very few foreign tourists, so most are relying on subsistence farming to survive. There were green shoots of recovery in the 2nd half of 2021, but Omicron has killed that off at least in the short term. So sad that Southern Africa is again bearing the brunt of this.

One of the main concerns mentioned in Fiona's last trip report was that parents would have to relocate to find work and consequently take their children out of Lesedi. This has happened a bit more this year – with six children taken out of Lesedi in 2021 vs 11 in the previous five years. It is still difficult to know what if anything we can do about this.

To take one example, we have mentioned Karen before, a bright, strong 15-year-old who was looking after her three younger siblings (who were all at Lesedi primary) while her parents worked in South Africa. The parents decided to move all four children to South Africa, reuniting the family. However without papers – and with a totally different syllabus – it has been a real challenge to find schooling. All four children have been out of school for a couple of months, and although it appears that the younger siblings will soon be able to enrol in local schools, Karen has to return to Zimbabwe to complete her Secondary schooling. We are looking at options to help Karen repeat Form 3 at a Zimbabwe boarding school so that she can get back on track with her education. We clearly can't help everyone but are keen to do what we can.

We are personally also helping a local lad called Edmon Ncube with a university scholarship. He had a rough childhood losing both parents but due to the timely intervention of an aunt who took him in,

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and dedicated teachers at Mosi-oa-Tunya High School, Edmon achieved great A-levels. He couldn't afford university (or a good pair of shoes), so we have stepped into help. It is heart-warming to receive WhatsApp updates of his university journey (although he has asked to call us Dad and Mom which is taking a bit of getting used to!!). Seeking scholarship supporters for the Lesedi kids is still a few years away but if anyone is interested in providing scholarships now please contact us, as through our links with Mosi-oa-Tunya High School I am sure we will hear of more high achieving youngsters who have hit the financial wall and need a little help to reach their full potential.

I was very slow to realise how important our feeding program is. The children receive breakfast and lunch every day during term time. During lockdown and holidays, various government-imposed rules limited what we could do but we still managed to provide food where we could and food parcels for those most in need. We are still debating what is best and what we can afford for the new Form 1 secondary school children. No other schools locally feed their children, but we aren't any other school, so we want to offer at least one meal if possible.



Lunchtime at Lesedi Primary

At the time of writing, 284 of our 292 pupils are sponsored. We have all been blown away by the generosity that you as sponsors have shown over the last 12 months in starting sponsorship or adding further children to your family. With no tourist groups visiting the school, we are relying heavily on our existing supporter base and friends of friends. The sponsorship program which we tentatively launched four years ago has become an essential element of Lesedi. We simply couldn't afford to run the school and feed the children without it, as the operating costs of running a school for c300 kids are sizeable. Aside from the financial benefit, sponsorship also has huge value in the friendships that are being formed which are nurturing the children as they grow.

In a few weeks' time, we will have another 70 kids looking for sponsors (new ECD A enrolments and Form 1s enrolling from other schools in the local area). So please keep spreading the word for us and maybe even consider an annual sponsorship as a Christmas gift for someone special. Once we get to the end of Form 6, we could have 700 children at Lesedi.

700 sponsorships would be wonderful, but I can hear Fiona quietly sobbing in the corner – that is impossible for one person to manage so we need to consider how we add some more administration

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support to make this possible. This leads to a broader question of succession planning and how we can make the Ngoko Charitable Trust sustainable forever and certainly beyond the three of us.

Several supporters have kindly indicated that they would like to leave a legacy to the charity in their wills which is really kind, but it reinforces the fact that we need to lift our eyes a little from the day to day to be more strategic. Hopefully the three of us have a few good years left in the tank and we are all committed to run Lesedi while we are physically able to. During 2021 we have set up a local trust in Zimbabwe that will put more formality and structure around the operational and legal side locally. We have prided ourselves that the three of us have managed to run the Trust so far, but we are mindful that we need to work out the longer-term resource and help we need.

Finally, I get onto the secondary school which was the main focus of our trip. As a reminder, we undertook some due diligence last year to review the secondary school options for our pioneer students who complete their primary education in Dec 2021, reaching the decision that we should build a secondary school on the Lesedi site. This will not only enable all the Lesedi learners to eventually continue up to Form 6 ('A' Levels) but we can also enrol up to 35-40 children from local primary schools each year.

Benson, Mrs Mutori, Ms Ncube and others have been flat out along with their normal jobs turning this decision into reality, over a very short time when for half the year the whole country was in lockdown. Progress to date has been remarkable:

- **Buildings:** Benson has built two double classroom blocks, two ablution blocks and four teachers' cottages. Two double vocational classroom blocks are under construction;
- **Infrastructure:** Another borehole has been drilled and piped 1.5km up to the new school. A new transformer and extension to the existing electricity network cables has been built. A road has been gravelled to allow access.



Two double classroom blocks at Lesedi Secondary

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One of the new teachers' cottages



Water tanks



Vocational blocks under construction



Ablution block

To understand how this all fits together check out this map. I love a good map, so I've been slowly GPS mapping as we have been building structures. The blue line is the boundary fence for all the land that Lesedi now owns. The primary school are all the structures on the left with the playing fields top left.



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The clinic and all the cottages are bottom left. The two structures with a green roof on the centre right are the first two secondary classroom blocks school and above that are the four teachers' cottages. The vocational blocks are being built to the left of the secondary classroom blocks – to the right is a field on the crest of a hill with beautiful views to the valley below which can be used for assemblies.

Despite all the progress, there was (and still is) a lot that needs to happen in order to be ready to open:

- **Subjects:** I've sat in a lot of meetings in my 30-year working life but the one the three of us had last week with Mr Sibanda (head of Mosi-oa-Tunya the main Secondary school in Vic Falls with 1,500 pupils) and Mr Masuku (head of Chamabondo Primary School) over a pizza was probably the most useful I've ever attended!! One of the many topics was the Zimbabwean curriculum and the flexibility around which subjects to teach. We are very keen that we offer strong options on vocational subjects to support kids with future career options. Following this meeting we finally locked down the subjects we are going to offer from Form 1 (subject of course to teachers). Core subjects are English, IsiNdebele, Mathematics, Combined Science, Geography, History, Physical Education and Principles of Accounts. Two electives will then be chosen from Agriculture, Food Technology, Building Technology and Metalwork (this may change to Woodwork depending on teacher availability). IT/Computers will be taught to all learners but not as a formal subject, although those with aptitude will be able to study Computer Sciences formally from Form 3. Other subjects will come on board from Form 3, with Combined Science splitting into Chemistry, Biology and Physics.
- **Equipment:** All the school desks and chairs needed for Form 1 have already been made locally. However other major purchases are still needed for textbooks, computers, food tech (a lot of hovering around auctions at local restaurants/hotels is going on) and the other practical subjects of agriculture, metalwork/woodwork and building. We don't need or plan to have everything on day 1 but we need to make a start. For science we plan to start small. The big project is to build a science block ready for Form 3 which is likely to be an eye watering \$100k+ but there are no facilities like this in rural Zimbabwe and we want to be able to develop the scientists of the future.
- **Teachers:** with 13 subjects and most teachers being able to teach 2-3 subjects we started the recruitment process. In the UK this is generally online and via agencies. In Zimbabwe it seems to be mainly by WhatsApp and word of mouth. Fiona had created some flyers to put up in Vic Falls town but when we got there, there were no posters anywhere. The President was in town opening the new Vic Falls stock exchange, so the place was immaculate. We managed to surreptitiously blu-tack a few flyers up and the following day we had a flood of CVs so it must have worked! I must have read 120 CVs. With only a handful of jobs available, I just felt sadness reading them. So many qualified, talented people all with their own personal stories and lives yet no jobs available for them. The CVs were all very formal although one was addressed optimistically to the Lesedi Human Resources department. Another had a very serious CV, raft of certificates and the final page was a photo of the candidate doing "jazz hands" with a huge smile on his face. We conducted several interviews when we were around, and Benson has continued to interview following our departure. We are confident of getting good quality teachers in the right subjects although the

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vocational subjects are proving a challenge to find appropriately qualified people. We very much look forward to welcoming all our new Secondary teachers to the Lesedi family.

- **Students:** we resolved early on to have two streams each year at secondary versus just one at primary. The Lesedi primary learners have a choice of staying at Lesedi into secondary or moving to another school. We hope they all stay but there may be personal reasons that some children do not transfer across. We should then have at least 35 spaces for children from other primary schools in the area to enrol at Lesedi Secondary. As you can imagine Mrs Mutori has been constantly badgered by local parents with kids not at Lesedi for Form 1 enrolment given our local very positive reputation. We are currently registering interest from all those current Grade 7s in our catchment area (what we term as being walk or cyclable to Lesedi) and given demand is likely to far outstrip supply have agreed some criteria. The Grade 7 exams are clearly important, but we also want to have a good number of places for kids who would otherwise drop out of school entirely or who have high potential which isn't reflected in the exam results. It is an impossible job working out who gets to enrol and who doesn't and I'm just glad Mrs Mutori, Ms Ncube and Benson are leading on that.
- **Sponsorships:** The Lesedi children were delighted to hear that their sponsorships from primary would continue into secondary. For the new intake we will seek to get sponsors as soon as possible. We have set our fees at \$70 a term for non-sponsored children which will undoubtedly be a stretch for a lot of parents, but experience shows that will not stop them registering.
- **Mother school:** Given the small size of the secondary school initially we need to register under the wing of a larger more established secondary school. We went through the same process for the primary school during the first few years. The school would be formally "annexed" (sounds like a 19th century European history lesson) to a mother school until it is of a certain size to stand on its own two feet, likely after 2-3 years for Lesedi. Following discussions with Mr Sibanda the Head of Mosi-oa-Tunya, he has kindly agreed to allow Lesedi to sit under Mosi's wing which will be great for us. He has a wealth of secondary experience and local / national contacts which will ensure that we establish the secondary on the best footing possible. Mr Sibanda visited the school when we had a Grade 7 post exam party (yes more pizza!) and was hugely impressed and positive about the opportunities. We are working out the finer details, but we very much look forward to working with Mr Sibanda and Mosi going forwards.

A massive thank you as always to Benson who has worked tirelessly over the last year to deliver on all the above. Also huge thanks to all our supporters for your donations. Classroom Block I, land and fencing were all funded by just one incredibly generous donor, who then also gave a second substantial donation towards equipment. The borehole was funded by the same donor who has generously funded all our boreholes. The chairs and desks were funded by another longstanding supporter. Other generous donations have been received towards equipping the Secondary school. Many other donations – small and large – have proved invaluable in getting us where we are today.

It is truly amazing what has been achieved since 2014 when our only structure was a simple open-sided shack. This progress has only been possibly due to our amazing supporters – THANK YOU!!!!

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There are many other requirements to sort out for the secondary school but we are getting there mainly due to the amazing efforts of Benson and the Lesedi team. One thing we do have are lovely secondary school uniforms which have been designed and source by Noreen, Benson's wife, who also did an amazing job on the primary uniforms. Four of the Grade 7s dressed up in the new uniforms and did an impromptu fashion show while we had the pizzas. They looked wonderful.



New uniforms for Lesedi Secondary

I don't know if anyone has managed to read this far, or you are one of those people who reads the final page of a book first to see if the rest is worth reading but I need to draw these musings to a close.

The past year has been a challenge for everyone particularly in countries like Zimbabwe which does not have the resources nationally or individually to cope with shocks like Covid. In these dark times, Lesedi meaning light is a real beacon of hope to the students, families, Lesedi staff and supporters. Despite the many lockdowns we haven't stood still at all this year with all the amazing developments noted above, mainly driven by the heroics of Benson supported by our wonderful Lesedi team. None of this would be possible without you, our incredible supporters who have allowed us to deliver so much light already. Although we can be incredibly proud of what we have achieved there is still much more to do, and we look forward to working with you to makes these dreams come true.

Although we remain humbled by the generosity of all our supporters we sadly must end this report with a further plea for funds. The secondary school is putting unprecedented pressure on our finances not only in terms of construction and equipping the new school but also substantially increasing the day to day operating costs of the Lesedi project going forwards. As we navigate these new challenges your support is needed more than ever. We welcome any contribution you can make to help us on this journey.

Take care and stay happy and healthy,

Graeme & Fiona x

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A few photos to help transport you to Lesedi...



Arriving at school gate before 7am



Busy sweeping prior to starting classes



Newly painted school signs



Netball and basketball courts



Lesedi HR department :-)



ECD A – Grade 6 class prize-winners for 2021

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Pizza for the Grade 7s after week 1 of exams



Chairs and desks for Lesedi Secondary



Benson during a rare quiet moment



Handwashing station



Washing school face masks at end of day



Personal face masks are washed before school

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Our beautiful Primary School



Lesedi Clinic courtyard – the prettiest clinic in Zimbabwe?



Hard at work



A future Lesedi teacher?



Some of the children who are the beating heart of Lesedi