

# LESEDI PRIMARY SCHOOL

March 2018

It has become something of a tradition that I start writing my trip report as I travel back to the UK after each visit to Lesedi. Having said my farewells to Benson, the teachers and pupils this morning, I have just boarded my flight to Johannesburg. So here we go...

For this trip I was able to spend a whole week at Lesedi, helping (or hindering) Benson and updating the accounting records with the huge bundle of receipts and invoices Benson presented me with. I also wanted to meet the families of the children benefiting from our newly-introduced sponsorship program. As usual I had been gathering supplies for the school for many weeks before departing the UK. The focus this time was sports equipment, along with another 5 Lenovo laptops. Two large suitcases had been packed and re-packed to maximise every bit of luggage allowance. Thankfully the bags arrived safely, and the teachers received their much-anticipated supplies with huge smiles.

Having last visited Lesedi in November, I wasn't expecting a huge change. Our current construction projects of a classroom for our ECD A pupils and a second teacher's cottage were progressing well, thanks to Benson's hard work during his "downtime" from safaris. However, the big surprise was the plants, trees and flowers around the school grounds. The school looks beautiful; an oasis of nature. A big planting project is underway, with members of the community contributing plants and trees. Benson in typical fashion is also scavenging plants from further afield. A huge number of palms and fruit trees are being planted, the latter being donated and tended by a lovely lady whose granddaughter, Shalom, is one of our sponsor children. She proudly asked if I would take a photo of her and Shalom with some of her plants.



Many of you will be aware that in recent months we have been seeking sponsors for some of the children at Lesedi. We are delighted to announce that we now have sponsors for thirty of the pupils identified by Benson and the teachers as needing help. Much of the background information we have received on each child has been heart-rending and it has been a wonderful experience to match them with caring sponsors.

I had brought out letters from many of the sponsors to give to the children and their families and wondered what the response would be. Would they understand the opportunity that was being given, particularly as so many parents haven't received an education themselves and are very much stuck in a cycle of poverty that has resulted in many dysfunctional families within the community?

I needn't have worried. On the first day the sponsor parents gathered to have photos with the children. Their gratitude was very genuine, along with the delight in receiving letters and photos from the new sponsors. I suspect this is the first time in their lives that someone has personally reached out to help them and they can't quite believe it. On that first day, I didn't have letters to give to two of the families and their disappointment was palpable. Thankfully we did receive messages from the final two sponsors during my stay, and remarkably all the children received letters in the end. Thank you to those of you who were involved in this.



Going forwards, we will continue to slowly expand the sponsorship program to provide education to as many kids as possible who would otherwise not attend school. Benson is now on the hunt for any children in the wider community that are not at school, particularly girls as they are traditionally less likely to remain in school. If the family can only afford to send one child to school they will choose to educate a son rather than a daughter whose education would benefit a husband's family, rather than their own. Benson's mission is to get all the girls back to school and he is extremely disappointed that a couple of years ago he was unable to convince a local mother to send her teenage daughter to school – soon afterwards the girl

became pregnant and now has her own child. The cycle of poverty continues. We will ensure that this child attends Lesedi in due course!

One happy story was that of 8-year old Primrose Sibanda. I had been sent details of Primrose late last year to find her a sponsor. Unfortunately, before we were able to do so, she disappeared from the school. Primrose had been raised by her grandmother, after her father disappeared and the mother remarried. Upon speaking to the grandmother, it transpired that Primrose had gone to visit her mother in Binga during the school holidays but then the mother had decided not to send her back again. Primrose had been phoning her grandmother in tears as she was desperate to return to Lesedi. Even at 8-years old she realised that Lesedi was the only option for her to receive a decent education and to learn computers. Her new school was a typical government rural school with few teachers or resources. The pupils certainly don't receive two hot meals a day as they do at Lesedi. Primrose's grandmother was so upset and wanted to go and fetch Primrose but didn't have money for the bus fare. The \$40 we gave the grandmother for the bus fare was probably the best spent money for a long time. True to her word, the grandmother got the next bus to Binga and returned with Primrose a few days later. Primrose is now back at Lesedi and has a bright future ahead of her.

During my week at Lesedi, I spent many happy hours wandering around the school with my camera. My grateful thanks to the teachers who patiently allowed me to dart into and out of their lessons, snapping the children as they worked. In the past this has been extremely disruptive as the children get so excited (I think the excitement is more to do with the camera than with me!). However, this time they were so much calmer. The children see so many tourists now that the novelty of my visits has largely worn off, except for the little ones in the ECD classes who still use me as a climbing frame whenever they get the chance.

To me the most touching moment of my trip came from one of the children in Mrs Mutori's Grade 4 class. As I passed one of the girls with my camera she touched my arm and gently called my name. I stopped and crouched down, anticipating a request for a photo. Instead, in a soft voice and perfect English she thanked me for the school, the computer classes and the chance of an education. I stumbled through a reply about how it was a team effort but I'm not sure if I made any sense as the unprompted words of thanks had melted by heart. I later realised that the girl is one of our new sponsor children, Amanda Kuwana.





I am delighted to report that the school now has internet. It is outrageously expensive, so we have a package that limits data usage to 25GB per month. In the first month there was so much excitement that the whole allowance was used within just a few days! However, with strict management the data allowance is now lasting most of the month and is making a huge difference at the school. Hopefully this is just a first step into the virtual world and in due course prices will reduce and fibre internet may become available, allowing us to improve the service and increase the usage by teachers and pupils.



Electricity is still proving difficult and incredibly frustrating. Having done our part so quickly after getting funding early last year, the long delay has been caused by the national electricity supplier, ZESA, not being able to source a transformer. Eventually they did get one, but it was



in Bulawayo and had to wait for transport. Then of course it sat in the Victoria Falls office for a few weeks. Now the transformer has finally made it to the school and it is fixed in place but for some inexplicable reason, the guys installing it didn't connect it. We have largely given up chasing ZESA now as it is clear they will continue to work at their own snail-like pace. Putting pressure on them may backfire and slow them down even further. Thankfully the school isn't

being held back as internet and the computers are being run off the generator, which chugs away throughout the school day.

Our other big frustration arises from our attempts to get approval for the medical clinic we are keen to build at Lesedi. The school and community desperately need a clinic nearby and whilst we have support from the local health department, approval has been delayed by the head of the District Council who is insisting the clinic should be built near his home. It really is so difficult to grasp the mentality behind this. After another frustrating phone conversation with the head of the council, Benson and I headed off to the offices of the Hwange Rural District Council to see if we could get things moving. It was a good meeting, and we remain positive that approval for a clinic at Lesedi will be granted, particularly as a lot of pressure is coming from the community. In the meantime, considerable patience is required!

We are also still pursuing the possibility of introducing a special needs class at Lesedi. Our initial application was turned down by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education as it was felt the school isn't large enough yet to justify a special needs class. However, Mrs Mutori is hopeful that this decision may be reversed once she is able to explain the situation in person to the District Schools Inspector at the next meeting.

One boy who would benefit from additional help is a young lad who joined Lesedi this term. Malvin had been seriously ill 3-4 years ago, probably due to HIV complications. During his illness, Malvin had a stroke which has left him with partial-paralysis down one side of his body. His speech is also slow. The teachers are trying to find further information about Malvin's condition from his father as we suspect that he would benefit from physiotherapy. Unfortunately, most parents don't have sufficient resources to cover long term medical costs, so it is unlikely Malvin is receiving any ongoing treatment.



Thanks to some generous donations at the end of last year, we have been able to purchase three further plots of land adjoining Lesedi from members of the community. We now have enough land to add a Secondary school and clinic, along with sports facilities. Fencing of the land is largely complete, thanks to a lot of hard work by Benson and his team at the start of the year.

During the preparations for this trip, there was a lot of discussion about what sports supplies I should bring out and we decided on badminton, rounders, netball and table tennis (ping pong). I was a bit dubious about the table tennis as I clearly couldn't carry a table tennis table in my luggage! Benson assured me that we would make one. I was intrigued by the prospect as the table is to be positioned outdoors and needs to be very robust – concrete is the recommended surface. The table would need a very strong frame and legs to hold the weight.

The first stop was Benson's homestead where we searched through the very random collection of metal that he has accumulated; much of which was sourced when the airport construction finished, and he spent many hours negotiating with and hounding the guys selling the leftover materials and equipment. Benson's face fell as he realised that he would need to part with some of his prized scrap metal – much of which he had earmarked for personal projects. We loaded up the truck with those pieces of metal we thought would be useful and headed into town to find the guy who makes windows for the school. He was busy finishing another job, but it didn't take long for Benson to convince him that our table tennis table should take priority. Space was cleared, and the discussions started over which pieces of the scrap metal should be used. I had provided the recommended dimensions and the surface clearly needed to be perfectly flat, so Benson spent many hot hours supervising the cutting and welding of the frame, while Honest (Benson's son) and myself went shopping for river sand and quarry stone for the concrete top.





It was late afternoon by the time the frame was finished, and we still needed to collect a baobab tree from a member of the local community who no longer wanted the tree next to his home (the roots spread widely and will damage the building). Baobabs apparently transplant well so we were going to relocate the tree to the school. We arrived in the dark to find the tree was rather larger than anticipated and still in a giant hole with roots not yet fully freed. I assumed we would give up and return the following day but that was never considered. Given that it was dark, precarious and I couldn't understand any of the shouted instructions I decided to become an enthusiastic onlooker as our small team of men heaved, grunted and occasionally cursed as they miraculously managed to heave the baobab slowly onto Benson's old truck. We then half-carried and half-dragged the tree back to the school ready for planting the following day. The relief of a successful mission was palpable, with hoots of laughter and comparisons of photos taken on cell-phones. We arrived back into town at 9pm; dirty, tired and hungry. Another typical day for Benson. My energy levels are very high when I visit Lesedi as I am so excited to be involved, but I wonder how I would cope doing this for long periods without a break – particularly following a long safari season.





The following morning, we were back at the school very early so that Benson could continue construction of the table tennis table. The corrugated iron roof of the generator room was removed and used to form a base to hold the concrete. I spent a very happy day at Lesedi, including playing badminton with Mr Ndlovu and introducing a few of the children to the game, causing much excitement and hilarity. Meanwhile, Benson spent the day with our trusty builders as they continued the transformation of the scrap metal into a rather impressive table tennis table! Unfortunately, I'm not able to include any photos of the finished product as the concrete needs to be kept wet for at least 14 days. After that it will be spray painted with green paint and white lines added. The total cost will be under US\$350, including all labour – helped by the donation of metal from Benson. The outdoor table tennis tables I have seen available to buy cost 10 times that amount!



In addition to the academic and sporting elements at Lesedi, we also want to do what we can to introduce the children to new experiences and broaden their horizons. Benson and I spent much time discussing how this can be achieved. We are keen for the children to get involved with the Scouts or Brownies if we can find a local group. We would also love to be able to hire a bus to take the children in groups to visit Hwange National Park to see the wildlife. Honest and his friend Buli are both safari guides and (time-permitting) plan to establish a wildlife club at the school, which will be a fantastic opportunity for the children to learn about wildlife and conservation.

In addition to the requests I received from the school for sports equipment, I was also asked to bring out some supplies for beading. I began my research and got totally confused by all the types of beads, thread, needles, carabiners, jump rings, head pins, ear wire, loops, rings and toggles! A random assortment was purchased and packed into my bag with a few grumbles about how much it all weighed and how few clothes I would be able to take with me. I must admit to being rather suspicious that the beads would be put onto a shelf at school and never used. What I hadn't realised was that Benson had asked someone in town to do a



few sessions with the children to teach them the basics of beading. The day after I handed the beads over I walked into the Grade 4 class to find all the pupils concentrating hard on making earrings, bracelets and necklaces. The children were in their element and having great fun. They had hand-written labels to attach to the beadwork, with the name of the child. The plan is for these and similar items to be available for purchase by visitors to the school. The proceeds will be used to buy more beads (which will be sourced locally in future), and the profits split between the school and the child. I think this is a great initiative and as I couldn't choose one child's work over another, I ended up buying all the bead work produced by the Grade 3 and 4 classes. It really is a good job that I was only at Lesedi for one week!



As usual I have rambled on for far too long in my enthusiasm to share my experiences at Lesedi. I will leave you with some further photos of the children overleaf. You may also enjoy a few video clips:

Grade 2 class doing sums with Ms Ncube:

<https://1drv.ms/v/s!AiVJCY59-vVqg5MCfgE-VsoWIVA3LA>

Grade 4 dance practice with Miss Ngwenya:

[https://1drv.ms/v/s!AiVJCY59-vVqg5ME5Ejju\\_l7dxvvCA](https://1drv.ms/v/s!AiVJCY59-vVqg5ME5Ejju_l7dxvvCA)

A few Grade 3 pupils enjoying trying out the new badminton equipment:

<https://1drv.ms/v/s!AiVJCY59-vVqg5MBQbUf7qDCCcC-oA>







