

LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

May 2019

I have just returned to the UK after spending a few days at Lesedi with Benson, catching up on all the progress since my visit in October last year. At that time, we were in the middle of an ongoing water crisis. As a result of the mains water being cut off by the authorities, all construction had been halted, the school day had been shortened and we were struggling to water all the new trees we had planted at the school. Benson was under huge pressure, with many hours each week spent waiting in long queues to fill a water bowser he had borrowed so that the school would have enough water for drinking and cooking. It was an extremely stressful time and very depressing.

After hearing about the situation, a long-standing safari guest and dear friend offered to cover the cost of drilling a borehole and installing a pump and solar power to deliver the water to the school. That generous donation was a turning point for us. The borehole drilling went well, and our new water supply is now pumped 1km up a 50 meter incline to Lesedi. With water supplies restored, it enabled Benson to resume construction on the various projects early in the New Year, particularly the clinic which was still at foundation level.

Benson has become used to project-managing construction at Lesedi, but building the clinic and two nurses' cottages has proved to be above and beyond anything he had previously experienced. This is the quiet season for safaris and a time for Benson to re-charge his batteries and spend quality time with family. Instead he left home before sunrise and returned well after dark...day after day, week after week, month after month. Weekends didn't exist for him and the pressure was immense. Imagine being responsible for a project such as this when the Zimbabwe economy is in crisis. Most supplies couldn't be sourced locally so were often purchased in Bulawayo or Harare and then put on an overnight bus for delivery (meaning a trip to the bus depot for Benson to take delivery in the middle of the night). Other supplies were bought in Zambia or Botswana and needed to be taken across the border. Every single purchase of materials for the clinic and two nurses' cottages has been negotiated by Benson, and most have also been delivered by him. There have been around 25 builders working on the project at any one time, all from the local community. Benson has also overseen all their work, checking for quality and giving instructions and guidance on a daily basis. Benson's personal vehicle, a Toyota Hilux, is used daily for loading, deliveries and towing. He has already sacrificed one vehicle to Lesedi, which has been ruined through all this hard labour and sadly the same is now happening to the replacement we shipped from the UK last year (which for a short time was his pride and joy).

So, I think we should take a moment to say a huge thank you to Benson for his incredible dedication, sacrifice and immense hard work. What he is achieving at Lesedi is inspirational and I suddenly find that I am rather in awe of my business partner of many years!!



LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

May 2019

I have posted various photos of the clinic and nurses' cottages on our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/ngokoproject). We are now reaching the finishing stages and appealing for further funding to complete the project so that we may formally hand over to the Ministry of Health and Childcare as soon as possible in order for the clinic to become operational. Before doing so we need to raise funds for the following:

- Equip the clinic - we have been provided with a long list of medical equipment and furniture. Initial quotations indicate that equipping the clinic will be a huge expense;
- Build and furnish an expectant mother's shelter (similar to one of the teacher's cottages);
- Add an incinerator and facility for disposal of medical waste;
- Add a couple of Blair (long-drop) toilets;
- Connect the clinic to the mains electricity supply at Lesedi.

Longer-term a further borehole will probably be needed to ensure sufficient water pressure is maintained at both the clinic and school.

Although the clinic has been centre-stage so far this year, the progress at the school continues apace. We now have 221 pupils attending Lesedi, with an even split of 110 boys and 111 girls. We have added Grade 5 classes this year, so now teach ECD A and ECD B (two years of pre-school) along with Grades 1-5 of Primary education. Two new teachers have joined us, Zakhe Moyo is teaching Grade 3 and Joyce Tholanah teaches Grade 5. Joyce is also a qualified special needs teacher. Another teacher, Cathy Siziba, has joined us on a placement as part of her teacher training. The charity now covers the salaries of seven teachers at Lesedi and tops up the salaries of the two government employed teachers.

Our child sponsorship program is continuing to grow and is making a dramatic difference to so many lives in this community. 128 of our pupils now have sponsors, with a further 15 awaiting sponsorship. During this visit to Lesedi, I was struck by the appearance of a huge vegetable garden at the school and was touched to hear that it was all the work of the father to two of our sponsor children. I understand he just turned up at school one day saying that he would like to give something back, given that a sponsor was now paying the school fees for his two children. Since then he has not only dug and planted the large veggie garden by hand but has also become invaluable in pruning trees and generally helping out around the Lesedi grounds.



The new Lesedi vegetable garden, courtesy of Mr Egias Edgar, father of two sponsor children

LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

May 2019

The other new assistant at Lesedi is the mother to Gracious, the young girl who was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes last year. When I last saw Gracious in October, she was in a dreadful state. Benson rushed her to a private clinic in Victoria Falls, where she was diagnosed with diabetes. The doctor later said that she only had hours to live at the time she was admitted, and he almost didn't agree to admit her.



Just six months later, Gracious is unrecognizable (yes, that photo really is Gracious!). She looks the picture of health and is very lively and cheeky. Such a wonderful outcome and only possible due to the constant monitoring by the teachers of their pupils. The mother of Gracious is now employed by the school, which allows the teachers to monitor the situation closely. We are still supplying the insulin and given the shortage of medicines in Zimbabwe Benson has had to go to Zambia to get supplies on more than one occasion. Another crucial responsibility for him!

An ongoing concern is a boy in Grade 3 called Kingston, whose health was visibly deteriorating earlier this year. In this case, the father asked for help from the school as he had been told the boy needed a specialist consultation and had no money to fund this. We used our school welfare fund to pay for a hospital consultation in Zambia, where Kingston was diagnosed with Sickle Cell Anaemia. He has been prescribed medication, which he will probably need to take for life, and is now getting regular check-ups at the hospital. We are covering the ongoing cost from the welfare fund, which is partly funded by the sponsorship scheme and is already proving invaluable.

Our school principal, Mrs Mutori, is now sharing her teaching duties with one of our new teachers, Zakhe Moyo, so has more time to spend in the office, ably assisted by our deputy principal, Cathy Ncube. Not only are they managing all the school administration but considerable time each day is spent dealing with welfare issues. An issue during my visit was ensuring that Kingston had transport to and from school each day. He lives about 3km from school and previously walked to school with his brothers. However, the sickle cell anaemia means that he has little energy and if he walks to school he is too tired for lessons. Transport is available but costs US\$30 per month, which is more than the parents can afford, despite all three of their children at Lesedi being sponsored since Kingston became unwell. This means that Kingston is often absent from school. Mrs Mutori and Cathy spent a considerable amount of time with the mother explaining and trying to resolve the situation, before arranging some temporary transport for Kingston. Their dedication and willingness to fight for their pupils is wonderful to see, and I am confident they will resolve this somehow. The next challenge is ensuring the rest of the family is tested for sickle cell disease as it is hereditary. In addition to Kingston and his two brothers at Lesedi, there is a 2 year old and a 3 month old baby.

Another example of the responsibility we now have at Lesedi for improving (and protecting) the welfare of our pupils, relates to one of our Grade 5 boys called Lecture. Lecture was absent from school until the final day of my visit. He had a wound on his hand which wouldn't heal, so the teachers had advised the parents to take him to the hospital. Lecture returned to school with a rag around his finger, which the teachers replaced with a clean bandage. We were told that the wound was cancerous, and the finger needed to be amputated as soon as possible to stop the cancer spreading.

LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

May 2019

We immediately decided that a second opinion should be sought in Zambia before any drastic action was taken. However, since returning home I have received a further update. Apparently the parents decided to take Lecture to a witch doctor instead of the hospital and this was his diagnosis. Mrs Mutori will be discussing this further with Lecture's mother and hopefully we will be able to step-in and ensure a proper hospital consultation and diagnosis.

All these examples not only show the importance of getting the new clinic operational but also what a crucial role the school is playing in the medical welfare of all the children. It really is no exaggeration to say that the school is not only changing lives but also saving them.

In my last report I mentioned the introduction of school sports at Lesedi. Sports are played on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and are extremely competitive. Our teams are now playing inter-school competitions, and despite still being younger than most of the other schools, they won 5 gold medals, 8 silver and 4 bronze at their first competition in February, which has encouraged them to participate more. Having watched the ferociousness of their netball and soccer teams, I am sure they will continue to do well!



We now also have the coach of a new cricket academy coming to Lesedi a couple of times each week to provide cricket lessons (for boys and girls). Maybe we will nurture a shining star of the future? It wouldn't surprise me!

The children really are flourishing in the Lesedi environment. The older children now speak English extremely well and their frequent exposure to visiting tourists is extremely beneficial, improving their confidence and social skills. We know that not all of the children will achieve academically so continue to expose them to more vocational interests. The beading enterprise is going well, with the children progressing to making more complex beaded jewellery to sell to visiting tour groups. Profits from sales are used for the benefit of the pupils and school. Whenever Benson travels on safari he brings back samples of craftwork for the children to try and make. The sewing machines we purchased a few years ago are now finally in use, making aprons and bags. Apart from raising valuable income for the school, new skills are being learnt that should serve the children well in later life.

A volunteer teacher who joined us for 3 months earlier this year asked me whether I was comfortable with the children singing and dancing for the tour groups that regularly visit Lesedi. The question initially made me wonder whether this is something we should be doing. However, on further reflection I actually don't think we would be able to stop them as the children love it so much. Many

LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

May 2019

a time I see groups of students spontaneously bursting into song or dance. I couldn't help but laugh watching one of our "babies" (an ECD A pupil) dancing and singing her way back from a sports lesson. The children are so proud of their school and love to dance, sing and generally show-off. While we know they are having fun, the exuberant greeting of tour groups will continue.

Despite all the achievements and positivity at Lesedi, there are of course ongoing challenges. Prices continue to rise in Zimbabwe, and it is becoming more difficult for the school to cover the cost of feeding the children. We have been extremely fortunate this year to receive a donation from one of our supporters, to improve the nutrition of our meals for a whole year. With the extra funding, the teachers chose to buy a cow each term which is then slaughtered, and the meat stored in the chest freezer they purchased from school funds. This is providing welcome additional nutrition, particularly important as many of the children will only eat starch at home. However, the prices of all the staple ingredients, including rice, mealie meal, veggies, cooking oil, sugar and salt has been rising steadily. The school allocates US\$2,000 from school fees each term to cover the cost of buying the staple foods, and yet the cost will exceed US\$2,600 this term. Our Deputy Principal, Cathy Ncube, is responsible for food procurement and scours local markets at the weekends for bargains. Not the traditional role for a Deputy Principal but it demonstrates the lengths the teachers go to in order to do the best for the children and keep Lesedi functioning in this difficult environment.

Despite our focus on the clinic in recent months, Benson has rather miraculously also managed to complete some additional projects at Lesedi. As a result of a generous donation last year, he has added a new ablution block for the boys and improved the original block, which is now only for girls. Fencing around the school has been improved, and another block of land purchased ensuring we have enough for our future expansion plans. A toilet and washing facilities have been added for the kitchen staff. A huge amount of rubble and stone has been transported to the sports field to form hardstanding for a tennis court (which will double as a netball court). Our fourth double-classroom block has also been completed. The water storage towers have been improved with plumbing added to connect to the supply from the borehole.

As if this isn't enough, Benson has also had to start construction of two new teachers' cottages. The new teachers at Lesedi require accommodation and also the expense of travel from Victoria Falls town to Lesedi each day is becoming too much for other teachers. In the midst of the clinic construction, Benson suddenly found himself under urgent pressure to build two additional teachers' cottages. One teacher has temporarily moved into a nurses' cottages at the clinic as she can no longer afford accommodation in town.

We now just need a final push to complete the clinic, assuming we can raise sufficient funds. Once that is handed over we can hopefully have a steady few months focussing on the school and avoiding any significant new expenditure until our funding levels recover. At least, that is the plan!

As always, we remain humbled by the support we have received and grateful for the wonderful donations that have enabled us to reach this stage of development. At the risk of pushing our luck, if you are considering a donation towards the clinic then please do help us to reach the finishing line and ensure the clinic becomes operational as soon as possible. A couple of generous donations have been pledged since appealing for further funding, but more will be required. Two nurses have already been allocated to the new Lesedi Clinic and the District Health Officer himself is considering relocating, so we are all eagerly awaiting completion. Apart from anything else, Benson needs to put

LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

May 2019

his safari “hat” back on and start focusing on his upcoming safaris. I know this will be far easier if the clinic is completed and formally handed over.

Please also continue to spread the word about our sponsorship scheme, as it really is at the heart of everything we are achieving at Lesedi. So many of our pupils would not even complete a Primary education without sponsorship, let alone receive any medical care.

Thank you for reading what has been another epic trip report. Enjoy the photos...



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May 2019



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