

LESEDI PRIMARY SCHOOL

November 2017

I have just returned from my third trip to Zimbabwe this year. This time I was only able to spend a couple of days at Lesedi, as the primary purpose was exploring new safari destinations. However, the impact of the school was not lessened by the shortness of our visit.

As usual, I used the opportunity to deliver supplies to the school. The planning has become like a military operation, using every ounce of luggage allowance. Husband Graeme was joining me on this trip, which meant I could carry even more than usual. Between us we delivered 10 laptops, more school posters and wall maps than Lesedi currently has space for, workbooks, sports bibs, a first aid kit and plenty more.

Upon arrival at the school we received a wonderful welcome with enthusiastic singing and dancing.



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Graeme hadn't visited Lesedi since early 2014, when the only structure was the basic pre-school classroom. He had seen all the photos and videos taken during my trips and listened to my excited updates, but nothing had prepared him for the transformation at the school.

The highlight of our two days was spending time playing with the kids and joining their lessons. Each time I looked over at Graeme he had a huge grin on his face and was mostly being mobbed by excited children. Their enthusiasm is infectious and such a contrast to the withdrawn, unsmiling faces we had first met in 2014.

After my last visit to the school in June, I had returned home and announced to Graeme that we couldn't abandon the Lesedi kids once they had completed Primary education. We are enabling the children to learn, hope and dream. This comes with a responsibility to ensure they can continue to achieve their potential. Graeme had rolled his eyes and immediately started worrying about the financial consequences of such a decision...no doubt hoping I would soon forget about it! However, on this trip we both visited a rural secondary school to deliver some posters and books. As we departed, I was heartened (and rather amused) to hear Graeme declare that we must provide secondary education. Spending a few hours at Lesedi will do that to you!

The Lesedi children are confident, energetic and motivated. They understand their school is special and show great pride in the progress being made. Their eagerness extends to sweeping out their classrooms at the end of each day; a task that was completed with great enthusiasm and teamwork. Those who were part of the original intake describe themselves as the "pioneers".

The excitement of having someone with a camera at school hasn't yet worn off and the children still love having their photos taken. Calls of "Fiona, Fiona, Fiona" followed me around, as they tried to get my attention so that I would take a photo. Although the children had learnt Graeme's name, I was amused to see that they were also shouting my name to get his attention. I fear that all white people visiting the school may now be called Fiona!



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All the classes had been sitting exams / progress tests before our visit and some were still ongoing, so teachers were busy invigilating. A few times we wandered into classrooms when a teacher wasn't present and were amazed to see that one of the pupils had been allocated the teacher role and was marching around the classroom with a long stick which was used to point at letters of the alphabet, days of the week, or months of the year, whilst the rest of the class called a response to each. Rhythmic chanting of "...D is for Dog, E is for Egg..." followed us around the class. The enthusiasm to learn was palpable; even our presence wandering around with cameras didn't break their concentration.

In previous updates I mentioned an adorable boy in our Grade 3 class who was really struggling, and we suspected he may be dyslexic. Teachers at a previous school had declared him unable to learn and had given up on him totally. I was delighted when his teacher, Mrs Mutori, informed me that he is starting to make progress now – most importantly he has realised that he is able to learn and is clearly thrilled by the prospect. At one point I glanced into a classroom and found Graeme surrounded by the Grade 3 class at the blackboard. The boy in question had the pointer stick and was pointing to our names on the blackboard and proudly saying each name in turn, whilst grinning from ear to ear.

Mrs Mutori teaches our largest class and with all the pupils at different levels it is difficult to give as much one to one tuition as she would like, however this boy has captured all our hearts with his constant smile and good nature. I was pleased to learn that his father helps with simple homework exercises, despite his own limited education. Regardless of this progress, we have several children at Lesedi who have special needs. We also know of one lad in the local area who is kept at home, unable to attend school due to a lack of suitable facilities. He will already have more than his fair share of challenges in life and it is distressing that this will be compounded by a lack of education unless we provide a solution.

I have mentioned previously our desire to provide schooling for special needs students. The Ministry of Education is currently processing our application for this and, if accepted, they should provide a suitably qualified teacher. We will allocate one of our classrooms to special needs pupils and our hope is that we can enable children requiring a bit of extra help to remain within the educational system and maximise their potential.

One big change since my last visit to Lesedi is that after coming out of retirement to help us set up the school, our headmaster Mr Ndebele has returned to his well-earned retirement. As we are under the supervision of another local school, we aren't currently required to have a head ourselves, but Mrs Mutori is now covering the head mistress role, ably assisted by our Grade 1 teacher, Miss Ncube.

One of Mrs Mutori's first challenges was to address the non-payment of school fees at Lesedi. This had become a problem at the school, despite the nominal fees being charged of \$35 per term for school fees and meals. The issue had been discussed frequently with the community and repeated promises of payment had been made,

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however generally these were not forthcoming. Apart from the impact on the ability of the school to cover its day to day expenses and buy food for the kids, this was unfair on those parents who were working hard to pay school fees. It had become clear that some action was needed but we had all been extremely reluctant to consider excluding any kids from classes.

The turning point was when Mrs Mutori took the difficult decision to turn some children away on the first day of term until such time school fees had been paid. Thankfully the message was quickly received, and most parents promptly cleared the outstanding debts they had run up at the school. Virtually all the children were back in classes after a few days. Unfortunately, the parents of a couple of the kids moved them to another school, rather than pay school fees. When they are excluded from this school for non-payment of fees, they will be moved again. It is a very depressing situation but at least the children are still in school. We will continue to monitor the situation.

Of course, we make exceptions for those children whose families or guardians genuinely can't pay fees, and they would never be excluded. Over time we will establish a formal assessment process to identify these children but for now we rely on the judgement of the teachers and Benson. We are in the early stages of setting up a sponsorship scheme, so please get in touch if you have interest in becoming a sponsor.

Because of Mrs Mutori's action, the parents now realise that we are serious about collecting school fees. It felt like a huge leap forward when members of the school committee asked for an opportunity to do some work in order to pay fees. We arrived at the school to find committee members busy painting the new classroom block, inside and out. They are setting a great example to the rest of the community and we thank Mrs Mutori for getting us to this milestone. We must remember that most of the community have themselves had very limited educational opportunities and they have lived without hope or role models for many generations. Lesedi is as much about educating the adults as the children. This really feels like a turning point.



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Many of you may remember our excitement earlier this year when we received some extremely generous donations, sufficient for us to fund the connection of electricity to Lesedi. We enjoyed a very speedy start to the project, with our electrical contractor bringing power lines to the school. A local electrician has also now wired up all the school buildings with electrical sockets and lighting. The final step is for the National electricity supplier, ZESA, to connect us to the grid. There has unfortunately been a delay due to a shortage of transformers but we are confident that connection will soon go ahead, and power will arrive at Lesedi.

We continue to investigate options for bringing internet to the school. A fibre connection is not yet possible, so we will most likely proceed with a WiMAX or VSAT service. It is likely that we will need to upgrade the service in due course but for the time being just having access to internet will be a huge leap forwards.

Going forwards we continue to have a long "to do" list at Lesedi. Benson has a break in his safari schedule in January and much of February, so is hoping to complete more projects if sufficient funds are available.

Our priority is to build a second teachers' cottage. This is imperative to attract more government teachers. We will need further cottages as the school continues to expand but two cottages should be sufficient for now.

Having built a third classroom block this year, we were hopeful that another block wouldn't be required until 2019. However, the first two classroom blocks now accommodate Grades 1 – 3 plus the computer lab. The two classrooms in the new block will be used for Grade 4 classes (which start in January) and our special needs classes (assuming permission is granted). This means that our youngest kids in ECD "A" would still need to use the original pre-school structure, which is freezing during the winter months. We had intended to move them to block 3 but this won't now be possible. Instead, we want to build a stand-alone structure of a similar size to the ECD "B" building, donated by Rotary International.

Other projects include fencing the perimeter of the school land. We had previously fenced around the school itself but the land we have acquired for future expansion remains unfenced. We also wish to purchase another plot of land, now that we are planning to provide secondary education to the Lesedi kids.

There are also some smaller projects, including the provision of a second water tank and connecting the teachers' cottage(s) to electricity and water. We are also hoping to provide more sports facilities.

As we are already low on funds, it is unlikely that all these projects will be possible. We will review costings and available funds in early January and will then decide what is affordable.

I hope you have enjoyed this update. We will be adding additional photos and video clips to the school website and Facebook page over the coming days, so please continue to follow our progress.

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On behalf of the pupils and teachers at Lesedi, Benson, Graeme and myself, we thank you for being part of the Lesedi journey.



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Some additional photos to enjoy:



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