

# LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

## November 2019

Graeme and I recently returned from a couple of weeks in Zimbabwe and Zambia. A week at Lesedi was combined with a short safari in Kafue National Park in Zambia to give Benson a break and some well-earned rest and relaxation. Although the safari was excellent, as ever the highlight for us was our time spent at Lesedi.

My previous visit was in May, when the clinic and ancillary buildings were in the final stages of construction. Graeme's last visit was 12 months ago when we were in the midst of a water crisis and the clinic was just a foundation block waiting to be built. What an incredible change for both of us this time around. I will start with an update on the clinic, which has been our major project this year.

Although most of the clinic structures were nearing completion when I visited in May, there has been plenty of work since then. The expectant mothers' cottage has been built along with a separate covered cooking area, mains electricity has been connected, 3 cubic metre "Otto way pits" dug out for the health care waste and Blair latrines built. A new borehole has been drilled to provide separate water supplies for the school and clinic (Babs' Boreholes I and II). In addition, the clinic is now fully equipped and ready to start serving the community. We passed the inspection by the District Environmental Health Officer and are waiting for the final inspection by the Nurses Council in Harare. My plan had been to distribute this report once the clinic received official approval to become operational, however the inspection has now been delayed to this Friday (22<sup>nd</sup> November) and we aren't sure how long it will take for them to process the report. So please watch our Facebook page for updates – we are so incredibly close to receiving our first patients!

Upon completion we had always intended to handover the clinic to the government hospital but after so much investment in the buildings and equipment we eventually concluded it was important to retain overall control. As a result, we decided, with some trepidation, to register as an independent clinic. We have been very fortunate to receive assistance from Mr Shida Mundela who has provided invaluable help in navigating the complex requirements of the registration process.



The implications of keeping the clinic independent are very daunting in terms of the costs of staffing and supplying medical consumables. A highly experienced doctor at a private clinic in Victoria Falls agreed to provide his licence details for our registration and we are planning to employ him on a 12-month contract while the clinic becomes established. The doctor is confident that by charging competitive rates and offering a good service we can attract business from Victoria Falls town and

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the community around the airport. The revenue from this business will be used to subsidise the cost of providing treatment and medicines to vulnerable people in the local community. This will be the ideal solution as we need to ensure the clinic is sustainable longer term, whilst remaining accessible to those who need it.

On the doctor's recommendation we have employed a very experienced nurse, Sister Irene, as matron at the clinic. She has been joined by Sister Monica, who Benson first met while guiding a safari in Kariba. Sister Monica was in sole charge of the clinic while her colleagues were away and having delivered three babies during the night she was still on duty and full of smiles the following day. The guests thought she was fabulous, and we are delighted that she has agreed to join the Lesedi family. Sister Monica is a bundle of energy and laughter and she and Sister Irene have already formed a tight bond.

We have also recruited two nurse aides from the local community, including Sami Ngwenya who had been teaching one of our ECD classes and has now moved across to the clinic.



Benson has demonstrated his usual thoughtfulness in adding final touches to ensure the clinic feels welcoming and friendly. Children's swings have been placed by the entrance and benches positioned under shady trees. Wild animals are stencilled on the clinic windows, and flowers and shrubs are being planted around the clinic courtyard.

The teachers and support staff at Lesedi School have embraced the clinic as their own, despite lots of good-humoured banter and friendly rivalry. I suspect this will be ongoing but it is fantastic to see everyone working together as a team. I have no doubt that the clinic will play a crucial role in looking after the health and welfare of our Lesedi children going forwards.

The focus on the clinic this year has meant that Benson has not spent as much time as usual at the school. However, progress continues unabated, with a fifth classroom block mid-construction courtesy of Grand Circle Foundation. A substantial dining / community hall has just been donated by Jafuta Foundation. We have constructed two teacher's cottages, bringing our total to four (each accommodating two single teachers or one family). At long last we have managed to secure a decent

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internet connection at the school, with reasonable speeds and an unlimited data package, and this has now been extended to cover the clinic.

We always deliver some school supplies when we visit Lesedi and this time our focus was reading books for the older children. The decision to bring books was instigated by a retired school librarian who recently visited the school. She not only recommended books to start our library but also purchased a considerable number for us to deliver on her behalf. It was wonderful to see the Grade 5 class reading such childhood favorites as Roald Dahl and Harry Potter. Each time one of



the children found a word they didn't understand, a hand shot up and one of us would go and help explain what the word meant. The first word Graeme was asked to explain was "Egyptologist", and I had to stifle my laughter as I left him drawing pyramids for an increasingly bemused child!

Hopefully the new library will not only help develop a lifelong passion for reading in some of the children but also expand their horizons and instil a curiosity about the wider world. We are continuing to compile a "wish list" of library books and if every visitor to the school donates just one or two books we will soon have an impressive library!

In previous reports I have mentioned a boy called Wellington who joined us from another school a couple of years ago. He was unable to read or write and had trouble articulating his thoughts. A very popular boy, the teachers at his previous school had written him off as unable to learn. Mrs Mutori spent a lot of time encouraging and helping Wellington, a process that has continued with his new teacher this year. After we delivered our books to the Grade 5 class, the teacher asked for volunteers to read out loud to the class. Remarkably Wellington raised his hand. He only read a short sentence but we were almost reduced to tears as it meant so much to everyone involved, not least to Wellington himself.

Another rather emotional experience was waiting for us on our final day at Lesedi. On arrival at the school we were drawn towards one of the classes by the sound of singing. Mrs Mutori explained that the school plans to enter national competitions for the best school choir, so they had contracted a local music teacher from town for weekly lessons. In fact, what she actually said was that they wanted to win the national competitions, not just to enter. Never let it be said that the teachers at Lesedi don't have ambitions for the pupils! At the time of our visit, the children were learning a poignant song about the impact of



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HIV and AIDS. Listening to the the singing was very moving and I have uploaded a video to our Facebook page for you to share the experience. If you haven't already listened to the video clip I recommend you do so. I have also added a fun video of the Grade 4 pupils doing some impromptu dancing.

We now have over 220 pupils enrolled at the school and will be adding a Grade 6 class from January, so anticipate having over 250 pupils next year. Incredibly, we now have a team of 21 staff at Lesedi, including teachers, nurses and support staff. Only two of our teachers have been supplied by the government and we have been advised that these teachers will soon be reallocated as a result of our registration as an independent school. Both teachers have expressed a desire to remain at Lesedi rather than transfer to another school so we anticipate employing them directly.

A key issue for us going forwards will be constraints on pupil numbers. Our Grade 5 class now has 35 pupils, which is higher than we would like and means that we have taken the difficult decision not to accept any new enrolments into that year. The high cost of living in Victoria Falls is forcing many people to move to homesteads in the rural areas, so the community around Lesedi is expanding rapidly. It is very difficult to turn away pupils but our only other option would be to introduce a second class for each grade, something that we are reluctant to do for now at least.

The economic situation in Zimbabwe is continuing to deteriorate and even those in employment are struggling. With the ongoing introduction of the new Zimbabwe currency, employers have switched from paying wages in US Dollars and are instead paying the same amount in Zimbabwe Dollars. With an official exchange rate of around 15 Zimbabwe Dollars to each US Dollar, this means that salaries are now worth a fraction of their previous value.

In these difficult times our sponsorship program is a lifeline for many children, not only enabling them to remain in school but also ensuring they are well fed. We had initially planned to only sponsor the most vulnerable children but have now decided to keep expanding the sponsorship program. At the time of writing we have sponsors for 175 of the children. In addition to the financial contribution, having a "special friend" is encouraging the children more than we could have imagined. One of our supporters told me about a book "I Will Always Write Back" by Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda. A true story of a penpal relationship between an all-American girl and a boy from an impoverished city in Zimbabwe. An inspiring read, it reminds us of the power of a helping hand to change someone's life forever. I don't believe we should deny any of our pupils the potential to form a special relationship that may transform their own lives.

In addition to their studies, our aim is to introduce the children to a wide range of non-academic experiences and, as they get older, vocational training. Benson is planning to establish a wildlife club / scouts' movement and is encouraging an appreciation for nature by planting trees and placing bird baths and feeders around the school and clinic. He has also donated some chickens and rabbits to the school, and the children are enjoying looking after them.

The older pupils now speak excellent English and their regular exposure to visitors means they are confident talking to adults. We had a meeting with a lady from the internet company who deals with a number of the schools in town. She commented that she had never known such well-mannered

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children, after all the pupils who walked by during our meeting politely wished us a good afternoon. I smiled inwardly at her astonishment, feeling very proud of “our” Lesedi children.

Over the past year Lesedi has been welcoming tour groups from Road Scholar and Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT) to visit the school and community. Road Scholar has been with us from the start of our journey and many of our supporters first visited Lesedi on a Road Scholar itinerary. However, we have recently been advised that Road Scholar groups will not visit Lesedi in future as they wish to support other projects just getting off the ground. We are grateful for their assistance in recent years and thank them for their support.

On a sad note, I should also mention the loss of Mrs Mutori’s husband in a tragic car accident last month. This was devastating news and we are of course providing what support we can at this difficult time. Mrs Mutori has now returned to work, supported by her Lesedi family, and we can only admire her strength, grace and fortitude. She really is an inspiration to us all.

Now that we are supporting the school and clinic going forwards, please be aware that future donations will be allocated where they are needed most, unless we receive specific instructions. So, if you particularly want to support either the school or clinic, please make us aware of your preference if you make a donation in future so that we can allocate accordingly. 100% of each donation (after any payment processing fees) will continue to be spent directly on the Lesedi project.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our amazing supporters for their encouragement and support. It really is incredible to stand in the school courtyard and slowly turn 360 degrees, absorbing all the progress over the past six years. The photo below is a reminder of the extent of the project in early 2014. We are all extremely grateful to Benson for his dedication, resourcefulness, tireless hard work and generosity of spirit in developing Lesedi to where it is today. Thanks also to



my husband Graeme who has not only been a significant donor but is now very actively involved in the day to day running of the charity, having taken over all the financial record keeping – a rather time consuming role given the complexities of the child sponsorship program in particular. We are humbled by the financial donations we have been entrusted with over the years, enabling us to

follow our dreams of making a difference in this community. The more we do, the more I realize it is just a drop in the ocean but as Benson constantly reminds me it is certainly a better option than doing nothing at all.

We departed Lesedi this time inspired by the progress and full of confidence for the future of the school and clinic. As we left the school en-route to the airport all of the children and teachers rushed from the classrooms to form what can only be described as a guard of honour from the school courtyard to the gate and then along the road. With music pounding out from a speaker held by one

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of the kids, they smiled, danced and waved. We couldn't believe how many children there were! All through our trip Graeme had been telling everyone that we wouldn't be able to return to Lesedi until June next year but as we worked our way along the lines of children he turned and said "we can't wait until June to return, perhaps we can squeeze in a visit before then". I can only agree. See you soon Lesedi!!

Finally, despite being dreadful at learning languages, Graeme and I are trying to learn Ndebele as our lives are now entwined with the Lesedi community. So, I will sign off with the following:

Siyabonga kakhulu (we thank you very much)

Libe lelanga elihle (have a good day)

Fiona

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THANK YOU

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