



Helping hands — tomorrow's scientists in crisis today

By Nancy Laird

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Anyone out there in the science community thinking of a sabbatical of volunteer teaching in a far away place? Think Lesotho.

Great scientists often start young. But what if you are growing up in a tiny landlocked country in Africa and your very survival is in question? Some Canadians want to change the situation in Lesotho. An incredible partnership has developed as a result.

Lesotho is a small mountain kingdom entirely surrounded by South Africa. It is a deforested country, in its fourth year of drought, with almost no natural resources. Its inhabitants suffer from severe food shortages. Lesotho has the fourth highest rate of HIV/AIDS in the world and over 50 percent of the population is under the age of 24. It is one of the poorest countries in the world.



Since August 2004, several Ottawa, ON, schools have been teamed with schools in Lesotho. Calendars have been sold to raise awareness and a recent call to collect textbooks has resulted in a huge response from local public and separate schools and the Ottawa-area home schooling community. As this article goes to

print, 10,000 books are on their way from Ottawa to build libraries in Lesotho schools.



In addition to books, schools need curriculum, resources, and inspired teaching methods. Currently in Lesotho, schools are run in an old style with rote learning and punishment for wrong answers. Class sizes in many schools range from 75 to 100 children. Many teachers have had very little modern teacher training. The resource kits and learning aids, so plentiful in our western schools, are unheard of in the large open classrooms of Lesotho. How simple can you make a simple machine? How do you teach the scientific method when there is no tradition of trial and error? Clearly if the teachers are assisted, the classes will benefit.

Cathy Mawson is a mother of five from Ottawa, ON. She has offered to help. "I'm just a home schooling Mom, but I know a lot about teaching children to love learning, teaching so that mistakes are seen as stepping stones to the truth, and where children are rewarded with smiles. They have so little, not even blackboards!"

Mawson plans to spend the month of March visiting seven selected schools. She will give workshops on problem solving and teaching science and math to about 100 teachers, with an emphasis on hands-on learning. Mawson sees the workshops as her work but knows meeting and interacting with the children will be

her reward. Her agenda is to bring hope, to inspire the teachers and students to have fun learning. Her wish list includes chess sets, puzzles, dice, measuring tools, games, and blackboard paint. As a friend of Cathy Mawson, I offered to help by gathering materials for the teachers at her workshops. Her stories will be posted on the Web site when she returns.

Thanks to a generous science community, Cathy Mawson's kits include CIC chemistry experiment booklets, NRC periodic tables of elements, University of Ottawa mineral charts, and pages from the Canadian Museum of Science and Technology in folders from Statistics Canada. As she leaves with these goodies, I'm awed by her courage and inspired by her faith. One small effort can make a world of difference.

Please reflect on the future scientists of Lesotho. Money donated can be used to purchase local materials and boost Lesotho's local economy where unemployment ranges from 60–70 percent.

Consider getting involved yourself.

For more information, visit www.helplesotho.ca.

To make a donation, contact info@helplesotho.ca
or

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