

Local groups open their hearts to impoverished country

By Joanne MacDonald

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Two very different Orléans groups are gearing up to help impoverished children in the mountainous communities of Lesotho, Africa.

Students at Bishop Hamilton School on Youville Dr. have twinned with a Lesotho school and are fundraising to finance a Futures Awards program which will provide annual awards for Lesotho students who strive for excellence in such areas as volunteerism, citizenship, or self-starter skills.

Additionally, members of The Quilter's Workshop are in the process of making 16 quilts for 16 orphaned girls in Lesotho.

Both projects are part of Project Help Lesotho, an initiative launched by Ottawa resident Peg Herbert after she met Sister Alice Mputsoe in an educational psychology class Herbert was teaching in 2001 at the University of Ottawa.

Sr. Alice is a member of the Sisters of Charity and was in Canada studying for her master's degree in education. She told Herbert her tiny country is one of the poorest in the world: families live in mountainous villages without electricity or running water; a balanced diet is rare; and life in general is extremely hard.

Lesotho, the third highest country in the world, is completely surrounded by South Africa and has a population of 2.1 million. However, the population is declining due to poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Lesotho has the fourth highest rate of HIV/AIDS in the world.

There are up to 100,000 orphans, many of whom are left to raise their siblings on their own.

With the help of Canadians, Herbert, who has travelled to Lesotho and has seen the country's extreme poverty, is now helping to spearhead projects such as the following.

- Twinning 10 schools across Canada with schools in Lesotho.
- Supporting 45 orphans with the costs of school fees, uniforms and books.
- Arranging for a university intern from Halifax to be financed by the Canadian department of foreign affairs to work in the twinned schools in Lesotho for six months.

Last week at Bishop Hamilton, Sr. Alice and Herbert gave a slide presentation to a group of about 50 students, showing them the Mahlekefane school they've twinned with in the northeast area of Lesotho.

The children looked at photo after photo of the Lesotho children who, despite wearing tattered uniforms and in many

cases no shoes, appeared happy to be attending school in the tiny two-room, one-tent school. The children must walk great distances through the mountains to attend school

"My hope is the schools will raise enough so that the principals will have discretionary funds so that if a child's uniform is totally falling off, they can get them a uniform, or candles to do their homework. Or food, but at the discretion of the principal and in quiet," said Herbert. "The schools we've twinned with have such



Photo by Joanne MacDonald, *The Star*
Peg Herbert, left, and Sr. Alice Mputsoe at Bishop Hamilton School, Ottawa (Orléans)

strong leadership. It's just that their conditions are so difficult."

Project Help Lesotho has raised approximately \$150,000 in its first six months, and Herbert said it has "far exceeded everyone's expectations."

Sr. Alice, a school principal, recently returned to Canada for the first time since 2001 so that she could travel across Canada with Herbert to thank Canadians for helping her country. She is currently taking a two-year leave of absence from her school so she can work on Project Help Lesotho fulltime.

"This is a miracle that has happened to me. I feel I need to say 'thank you' to the Canadians for the kindness they have shown to my country," said Sr. Alice.

"Many souls have been touched, many hearts have been changed for both of my people and of many Canadians."

She admitted there are many challenges ahead in the project.

"My only prayer is that it continues until we get the means of dealing with our own problems," she said. "Of course, problems go on and on forever but the challenge is being faced now. I think this is a very big support for us now."

Joan Ramsay Burn, a member of The Quilter's Workshop quilting group which regularly produces

quilts for charity, said she was spurred to get involved with Herbert's project after she heard her speak last year at St. Bartholomew's Church.

"I was really moved," recalled Ramsay Burn, adding her fellow quilters readily agreed when she suggested they launch their ambitious 16-quilt project. "I thought that these girls have nothing, absolutely nothing."

The quilts will feature brightly coloured pinwheel patterns contrasted with white squares. Ramsay Burn has asked the people of St. Bartholomew's to sign their names or greetings on the white squares, for a cost of \$10 each which will go to the Lesotho project.

"In that culture, getting a blanket from a stranger is the ultimate sign of respect," she said.

She added the quilting group — all members of The Common Thread Quilt Guild in Orleans — wants to complete the quilts by June.

"We have never done anything like this before. It has required a tremendous amount of organization to do," she said, noting that all of the fabric is being donated by the quilters. Some merchants have also wanted to donate fabric.

"Anyone I've encountered has asked, 'How can I help?' It's very encouraging," she said.

For more information on Project Help Lesotho visit the website www.helplesotho.ca