

Whitbeck in Lesotho

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“I wish I could push the hills aside so I could see Canada” they sang (in harmony, of course). “Canada is the most wonderful country in the world” they danced.

The 300 primary school students indulging in such exuberant (and un-Canadian) celebration were in the tiny village of Mahlekefane high up in the mountains of Lesotho in southern Africa. They were celebrating the gift for their two-room school of desks, bookcases and textbooks from Canadian charity Help Lesotho (www.helplesotho.ca).

I was living in the small town of Hlotse as a Help Lesotho volunteer to teach project leaders Canadian standards of accountability and start a seedling-raising program in high schools.

Lesotho is a tiny mountainous country of 2 million surrounded completely by the Republic of South Africa.

The first king, Moshoeshoe I, managed to keep both the British and the Boers from conquering his little redoubt in the mid-1800's. But, recognizing a need for British protection, he gave out that the British had indeed won the war.

He appealed to Queen Victoria that his people might be considered “fleas in the Queen's blanket”.

Lesotho (formerly Basutoland) remained a British protectorate until 1966.

Since then, it has followed the pattern of so many African countries—Prime Ministers too addicted to power to allow themselves to be voted out; corruption; nepotism; rote education modelled on the British curriculum; poverty; unemployment; recurring drought; lack of communication and transportation; and, at 42%, the third highest HIV/AIDS rate in the world.

Perhaps because there is only one ethnic group, the Basuto, Lesotho has been spared ethnic conflict, so has not hit Western headlines.

The mountains are very old; their layers flat, unlike the Rockies. They often weather into pyramidal shape. With mist on them, they remind one of both China and Egypt.

The laterite soil is extremely friable, so any wind scoops up great red clouds. The rainy season brings tomato-soup-like runoff to the ditches and ruts.

A few villages and isolated shepherd's kraals for sheep, goats, cows, donkeys and horses dot the barren mountains. Fearing the government or the chief will steal them, villagers plant no trees, and shrubs are quickly taken for firewood.

In some places the hills look so peaceful, gleaming white in the sun, a few scattered patches of green here and there, with no people and no grazing animals. But you are looking at bedrock and the future of the countryside.

The government has recently abolished school fees for primary grades and is expected soon to do so for high schools. Trouble is, they seem not to be offering to replace those funds.

In Mahlekefane, since 1970 kids have had to write exams and assignments on their laps sitting on a cold mud floor.

The teachers have, on average, a grade 7 education, so they too are learning from the Canadian books.

Even though the corrugated metal roofs are held to the ground by strands of barbed wire, occasionally the roof blows off and the un-framed stone walls collapse. The (very small) windows and doors don't fit properly.

It gets down to -5C in the mountains in the winter.

Children are allotted one exercise book a year. If they fill it or lose it, they just have to sit.

Many do not have pencils, and the teacher probably doesn't have more than one or two.

Two bags of crayons may have to do for a school of 800.

The Grade One class in a typical school had 114 kids in it.

Kids are routinely whacked if they get something wrong.

Toes stick out of too many shoes.

High school students used to buy textbooks from the government. Now the government rents the books to the students. The fees go into a government fund. When the books need replacing, the school is supposed to be able to draw money from the fund. Principals don't expect any money to be there when that time comes.

Every school has an extensive garden, most raising pigs and chickens as well; maize if there's land enough.

The heroic principals probably spend 80% of their time trying to stabilize the food and water situation and secure their property and equipment from thieves and vandals.

One primary school: 589 students, including 48 double orphans (both parents dead) and 141 single orphans, soon, no doubt, to become double orphans. And nobody has counted the kids that aren't in school at all because there's nobody at home to get them up and out in the morning.

When a village woman finds out she's HIV positive, she tries to hurry up and have more children to take care of her. But mostly, she tries to avoid finding out.

Weekends are devoted to the very long funerals. People can expect to spend a ruinous \$10,000 - \$15,000. An animal is killed, usually a cow. Everybody comes, maybe just to get a decent meal.

That day in Mahlekefane, the women had spent the day cooking, so glad for once to have a feast celebrating something positive.

Grandmothers rarely finish raising their own broods before being saddled with orphans from the next generation.

The government-financed, and often inadequate, school lunch is sometimes all some children get to eat until the next shipment of overseas food gets distributed, especially from households headed by children.

But then, at the end of another long, rutted, bumpy road in the middle of nowhere, the Prefect of a high school graduating class told us with unshakeable confidence that he was going to be a pilot. He had never been inside an airplane or even seen one on the ground. With his square jaw, lanky frame and infectious grin, you could almost see the captain's uniform materializing on him.

The people are wonderful—very friendly, and so eager to please.

Sometimes too eager. I was giving a workshop for accounting teachers. Just at start time, the principal rushed in and demanded that I go sit in his office until his students could sweep the filthy floor. In their zeal, they removed my carefully assembled chalk and duster (eraser). (A teacher in Africa learns quickly to hoard chalk and erasers). So--another trip to the office to get more chalk and a duster before we could get started.

A number of Canadians staff an HIV/AIDS clinic in Hlotse sponsored by the Ontario Hospital Association and Stephen Lewis's group, Change.

For Canadian Thanksgiving we and some Peace Corps types assembled for turkey from Brazil with all the trimmings and real pumpkin pie at the home of the family of Dr. Jennifer Young from Collingwood, whose mother lives in Thornbury.

Greetings are a big thing in Lesotho. People working in the fields and especially children love to wave as you drive past. Walking down the street is an endless dialogue of "How are you" "I am fine. How are you," interspersed with "Where are you going?"

One day a tiny kid in a pram called out to me: "Hello" (in English). Me: "Hello". Kid: "How are you?" Me: "I am fine. How are you?" But he couldn't remember the next line and looked panic-stricken at his mother for a prompt. We both laughed. They start'em young.