

LESEDI SCHOOL & CLINIC

November 2020

When we waved our farewells to the Lesedi children late last year, we were in blissful ignorance of the pandemic on the horizon. We were planning to visit again in June, although felt that was too long to wait. Just one year later we feel genuinely blessed to have had the opportunity to travel to Zimbabwe. The timing was perfect – the school opened in full on 9th November having been closed since March, the UK entered another month-long lockdown but thankfully allowed business travel, Zimbabwe opened its borders to International travel and Ethiopian Airlines took to the skies. It felt as though the stars had aligned to make our return to Lesedi possible. The timing also enabled us to collect a huge bundle of Christmas cards and notes from the sponsor children, which we will mail out in time for Christmas. That in itself made the trip worthwhile!

Given the stringent precautions in place to protect from Covid-19, we were unsure what to expect at Lesedi. We only knew that the atmosphere would be very different from normal – no singing, dancing, sport or playing is currently allowed. Breakfast and lunch are delivered to each classroom, limiting interaction between the children. The children would be wearing masks all day – would we even be able to see any of the beautiful Lesedi smiles?

We need not have worried. Yes, it was different, but we are all used to the “new normal” nowadays, so it didn’t feel too strange. The children are all incredibly well behaved at school, diligently wearing their face masks despite the high temperatures. The school wasn’t the vibrant, noisy, energetic place we normally experience, but instead you could almost feel the palpable sense of relief and excitement to be back at school, learning and being with friends. It has been an extremely tough few months for many of the children and they are incredibly happy to be back in school.

We were impressed by the systems in place to keep everyone safe. Each child arrives for school wearing a face mask. On arrival they are handed a clean Lesedi face mask, at which point the child washes the other mask and hangs it on a line to dry during the day. At the end of the day, they collect the clean mask and wash the Lesedi face mask, ready for the following day. Simple but effective. Once at school, the children remain in their classroom, only leaving to wash hands and dishes before and after meals. Each classroom has a separate washing station set up outside the class. At the end of each day the teachers thoroughly clean the classrooms. All this means the school is getting through copious amounts of water each day, so we are hugely relieved that our boreholes are fully operational once again.



Face masks drying on the line - each child has their own peg



Washing dishes after lunch

During our stay at Lesedi, there were inspections of the school by the Ministry of Health & Childcare, and by the Ministry of Education. The school passed both inspections with flying colours – there were not even any suggestions for improvements. Well done to the whole team!

Of course, the precautions taken at school cannot control what happens outside of the school grounds. I had a wry smile seeing the kids playing after school or cramming into a minibus to travel home. Driving past children walking home together, you would see them from a distance hurriedly putting their face masks on after spotting our truck. Zimbabwe has thankfully been spared the worst ravages of COVID-19 so far, but the number of locally transmitted cases has increased in recent weeks, forcing the closure of several schools. There is no certainty that Lesedi will be able to remain open but for the time being we feel immense relief that we are able to educate and feed the children again.

When we last visited Lesedi, the new clinic had been completed but we were waiting for the final inspection and approval. This took longer than anticipated, however we finally received the registration papers on 9th March, enabling us to open the doors to the community. The clinic had just started doing individual medical checks for all the Lesedi pupils when the lockdown started and schools were closed.



Our stunning Lesedi Clinic

For the children returning to school now, there is still a novelty value from the clinic. We were initially perplexed to find a high number of learners absent from classes, having been taken to the clinic after complaining of stomach-ache or other ailments. It was particularly strange as most would be from the same class. We soon worked out that word was getting around that the clinic is a great place to be...you are looked after really well and will probably be able to lie on a bed for a while, maybe even be wheeled round on a trolley. For our Lesedi children that is a real treat indeed and something to brag about to their friends. Benson quickly found a solution, asking Sister Irene to give a saline injection to the next unlucky patient! Although the clinic still hasn't lost its appeal, feigning illness to go to the clinic is now a bit riskier!

The timing of the clinic opening at the start of a strict lockdown resulted in a quiet few months for the team, although patient numbers are now steadily increasing. The clinic is able to offer vaccinations, although we are still awaiting approval to distribute anti-retrovirals (ARVs). The process is ongoing but takes a long time! We have been delighted to welcome our first Lesedi babies into the world and have many more mothers-to-be registered with us. On the subject of babies, we are delighted to announce that Sister Irene has just given birth to her second child, a baby boy, and is

now on maternity leave for a couple of months. We are pleased to welcome Sister Nhondova of Siyawareva Clinic in Jerera, who is providing cover during this time.

With the opening of the clinic, we can monitor the health of our Lesedi learners much more closely. We have several children who were previously relying on Benson and the teachers to provide a continuous supply of medications, such as insulin, so it has been a huge relief to hand over responsibility to the clinic. In addition to ensuring supplies of vital medication, the nurses are working closely with the teachers to identify health issues at an early stage before they become a crisis. What a valuable resource to have at Lesedi going forwards!



Lesedi pupil being checked at the clinic



Sr Nhondova

Since the start of the lockdown, we have been extremely concerned that not all our learners would return to Lesedi. The collapse in tourism means that many people have lost their jobs, particularly in Victoria Falls which is so heavily dependent on tourism. Some parents have moved away to try and find work, taking the children with them. It is all credit to the teachers that nearly all our learners have returned, although we are sad to be losing two siblings whose parents have re-located to Binga, some 300km from Lesedi. Two other children are still in Binga, having spent the lockdown there, although the parents assure us they will be returning to Lesedi once they have funds for transport.

Although we have a strong urge to fight for the future of all our Lesedi children, there isn't much we can do if parents decide to relocate and transfer their children to a local school, despite knowing that the children won't get the same unique opportunity that they have at Lesedi. We can only leave the door open for their return in future if things don't work out. In most cases though, the situation is not as straightforward and we find ourselves needing to make difficult decisions – do we fight hard for a child to remain, or make the tough decision to let them go? The instinct is to fight but we also need to be realistic about what we can and should do.

One great outcome recently involves a Grade 6 girl, Tamia Muchena, who moved to Bulawayo with her mother during the lockdown. The mother requires medical treatment and has been able to stay with family in Bulawayo. However, she recognised that she would be unable to afford an education for her daughter in Bulawayo, so took the difficult decision to send her back to Lesedi. Although we don't offer boarding, Tamia has been taken in by our deputy principal, Cathy Ncube. A wonderful example of everyone working together for the good of the child.

Not all the cases are so easily solved. One of our biggest issues at present revolves around daily transport to Lesedi. Most of our learners are local and walk to school each day. However, we have 58 children who come from further afield, with some walking up to 10km each way to attend Lesedi and

others arriving in a shared taxi/minibus arranged by the parents at a cost of around \$20 per month for each child. Unfortunately, as circumstances change, some parents are now unable to pay for transport. This leaves us with a challenge. Obviously, we want the children to continue at Lesedi but if we start helping some parents with the cost of transport, word will soon get around and other parents will claim an inability to pay, knowing that we will step in and cover the cost. Given that each child is at Lesedi Primary for 9 years, including pre-school, the cost of transport alone could be over \$1,600 per child during their primary education. We have had several discussions about this and concluded that future enrolments must be restricted to children living within walking distance of the school, to avoid this becoming an ongoing problem. We will also encourage parents of pre-school children to transfer them to a local school if unable to pay for transport. For those children who have been attending Lesedi for a few years already, we are aware of a handful of cases where transport costs have become a problem and we will do what we can on a case-by-case basis.

There is one local family we have become particularly concerned about during lockdown, and the situation highlights many of the complexities we are dealing with. The parents fell on hard times and in desperation moved to South Africa a year or so ago to find work, initially leaving a relative in charge of their four young children. Since then, there has been a succession of people stepping in to take care of the children, including a neighbour and more recently a single mother with her own young asthmatic son. The support that the parents have been able to send home has sadly been insufficient and we have recently been providing food parcels and other help to this child headed family. Two of the sisters attend Lesedi, a young brother is not yet at school, and the older sister, Karen, has just turned 15 years of age. We are particularly concerned about the youngest child, who needs ongoing medical treatment but is unable to walk the long distance to hospital in town – and is too heavy for Karen to carry.

Benson, Graeme and I visited the homestead and met all the children, who I have to say are all a huge credit to their absent parents. Karen is mature beyond her years and has become a surrogate parent to the younger children. This is a girl who given the right support will go far in life. She even has ambitions to attend Harvard and I absolutely believe that will happen for her. Karen attends Mosi oa Tunya Secondary School in Victoria Falls town (more on that school later), walking a couple of hours each way to get to school. During lockdown she has also been walking a long distance to Lesedi every few days to borrow books. While her siblings sleep she sits in a corner of the one small room, with two beds shared by six people, and she reads. We were impressed by Karen beyond words and were fortunate to be able to give her a Kindle that had been donated by one of our neighbours. We can purchase and download books remotely, and Karen brings the Kindle to Lesedi to download our purchases. I worry that we will not keep up with her, as she is a prolific reader. Karen is smart, strong and ambitious. She is also an extremely vulnerable 15-year-old girl trying to convince the world that she is coping. Since arriving home we have heard that the person who had been staying with the children has left, given the parents hadn't paid her \$30 salary for a couple of months. The situation is complex, but we will continue to look out for the children and give our support.



Checking out the safety of a well used by the children

The deteriorating economic situation in Zimbabwe means that people are moving out of town and relocating to rural areas to reduce living costs. The area around Lesedi has been a huge beneficiary,

with many families setting up home in the area. The growing reputation of Lesedi, combined with an increase in the local population, means that there is huge demand for places at the school. With siblings automatically qualifying for a place in ECD A, and all other grades already at capacity, parents are exploring every possibility to get their child enrolled. Mrs Mutori has to reject enrolment requests on a daily basis, with most parents then approaching Benson as they wrongly assume he has influence over the decision. Whilst it is great to see the school in high demand, it is more important than ever that we focus on enrolling children who otherwise may not be able to attend school.

At the time of writing, 212 of our 241 pupils are sponsored, with a further 10 children waiting for sponsorship. With another ECD A intake starting in January, there will be more children needing sponsorship. Without tourists visiting Lesedi, we aren't receiving many new sponsorship requests. So please keep spreading the word for us and maybe even consider an annual sponsorship as a Christmas gift for someone special. I find it difficult to express the difference the sponsorship program is making at Lesedi. Not only does the sponsorship income provides a really solid financial foundation for the school, but it enables us to do much more than would otherwise be possible. Providing 241 children with two hot meals a day is an expensive undertaking that is only possible because of sponsorship. Medical treatment and other welfare needs can only be provided because of sponsorship. However, I still maintain that the financial benefits of sponsorship are outweighed by the friendships between the children and their sponsors. Whether the sponsor writes regularly, or doesn't write at all, each sponsor child knows that someone is looking out for them - for no reason other than they choose to do so. Your support brings hope, aspirations, ambition and - above all - love into the lives of the Lesedi children.



Happy faces at Lesedi (face masks were removed for the photos...just in case you were wondering!)

With Grade 7 starting in January, we are all mindful that our pioneer students will graduate from Lesedi Primary at the end of next year. A few years ago, we confidently proclaimed our intention to build a Secondary School at Lesedi, after experiencing a belated "lightbulb moment" that it would be irresponsible to give the children ambition, hopes and dreams then abandon them after their primary education. Given that the secondary school will be required in 14 months time, we decided we needed a fact-finding mission to work out what is involved, and to check that there aren't any other suitable options.

There are a few secondary schools around Lesedi but the main options for our Lesedi children would be Sizinda Secondary and Chidobe Secondary, which are both accessible without transport (despite being a long walk). We arranged to visit the schools to see what facilities they have, and to assess whether a secondary school at Lesedi is actually needed.

We visited Sizinda first and were graciously welcomed by the new headmistress. The school teaches Forms 1-4 (up to O-Level only) to about 230 pupils. As this is a government school, they have no control over class sizes which can go up to 60 per class. Sizinda has 10 teachers, with most able to teach two subjects. The classrooms were similar to those at Lesedi Primary, and the school didn't have any special facilities. As with most rural schools, there is no science lab at Sizinda, so science is taught in front of a blackboard with no practical experiments possible. As Combined Science is a core subject, getting a science lab is high on the school's wish list but an extremely costly investment. This is definitely something we will need to aim for at Lesedi longer term.

Our next stop was Chidobe Secondary, where we were again greeted warmly by the headmistress. Until only a couple of years ago, the teachers at Chidobe didn't have any classrooms so the pupils were taught under a tree. As a result of donations, the school now has four classrooms and several teachers' cottages for the six teachers. However, we were shocked to hear that none of the cottages have plumbing, so the teachers are forced to use the learners' toilets on the far side of the school land – day and night.



Chidobe Secondary School

Chidobe was due to re-open a few days after our visit, having initially remained closed due to the teachers strike that crippled most of the government schools in Zimbabwe. When we asked about the precautions they will be taking against Covid-19, we were told that the school didn't yet have any face masks or sanitizers. Apparently, an allocation is available for them at the district offices in Hwange, however there is no money for transport. The headmistress explained that in the past she would dip into her own pocket to help but that she can no longer afford to do so.

Income for school running costs comes from school fees, which are notoriously difficult to get payment for as schools are unable to exclude learners for non-payment of fees – so the only power they have is to withhold examination results until arrears have been paid. This isn't much incentive until O-Level results, and then only if a child thinks they have done well. School fees are quoted in local currency, and inflation has eroded the value massively. At Chidobe, the Term 3 fees are the equivalent of just US\$0.50. With 130 pupils enrolled, even if all the parents paid their school fees the total income would be just US\$65 for the whole term! It is unlikely that the school will even receive this amount, as many parents are objecting to paying fees for a whole term when the school will only be open for a few weeks.

Our visit to Chidobe was very sobering for all of us, illustrating the grim day to day reality for so many rural schools across Zimbabwe. With the economic situation in Zimbabwe continuing its downward spiral, it is difficult to envisage the situation at Sizinda or Chidobe improving over the next

few years, unless they receive private donations. Despite our admiration for the heroic efforts being made by the teachers at these schools, we know that we will be letting down our Lesedi children if we don't provide something better for them.

Our final secondary school visit was to Mosi-oa-Tunya High School, located in the Chinotimba suburb of Victoria Falls. Although this school wouldn't be an option for our Lesedi pupils, due to the higher school fees and need for transport, we had heard great things about how the school had improved in recent years under the leadership of its headmaster, Mr Roland Sibanda. By all accounts, Mosi is setting the standards we should be emulating. The school enrolment has grown to more than 1 500 pupils with a staff complement of 72 teachers, so this is a massive secondary school. Mr Sibanda was extremely generous with his time and I am sure will be a great source of advice as we move forward with our own plans. The school teaches Forms 1 – 6, combining O- and A-Level examinations with HEXCO vocational qualifications - something we are also keen to offer at Lesedi. We were also interested to see their fully equipped science lab.

Although the sheer size of the Mosi school was intimidating, we came away feeling that given time it



The impressive 5-room science lab at Mosi oa Tunya Secondary School

could be within our reach to do something similar at Lesedi – although obviously on a smaller scale. It certainly gives us something to aim for. Interestingly, when Mr Sibanda became acting head in 2010 the O-Level pass rate at the school was just 2%. By 2014 it had reached 12.3% and by 2019 it stood at 30.5%. The A-Level pass rate was an impressive 88.6% last year. Despite Mosi school clearly being in high demand, it is interesting to note that Mr Sibanda has never achieved payment of school fees in excess of 40% of the amount owed in any one

year. The fees here are currently the equivalent of US\$11 per term but the intention is to increase them next year back to the original cost of US\$80 per term. Good luck with that!

Our visits to Sizinda, Chidobe and Mosi oa Tunya schools reinforced our belief that a secondary school will be needed at Lesedi in order for the children to continue to receive a quality education. Benson is up for the challenge of construction, whilst Graeme and I are already stressing about the financial commitment. We are now a long way from the one-room pre-school classroom we built in in 2012! Although the thought of a secondary school is extremely daunting, and far from our comfort zone, we feel as though we have a moral duty to continue this journey on behalf of the Lesedi children whose futures are in our hands. Sometimes in life we just need to have a belief that things will work out...like Karen's certainty that she will eventually get to Harvard. We are incredibly fortunate to have so many wonderful supporters who are on this journey with us, offering constant encouragement, motivation and financial support.

On a practical note, we already have the land set aside for the secondary school and have submitted an application to the District Council, which will need to give approval before we can draw up plans and start work. We have been told that the Council members are meeting this week and that Lesedi will be on the agenda. We will keep pushing as we remember all too clearly how long it took to get approval from the Council to build the clinic! Thanks to an extremely generous recent donation, we already have funds for construction of our first classroom block. However, we are likely to require a minimum of six teachers from the start, so will need to construct at least three double teachers'

cottages. There will be infrastructure costs as we extend the mains electricity to the new land and add vehicular access. A new borehole will be needed, along with ablution blocks. However, for the time being at least, the two schools should be able to share the dining hall and sports facilities.

One additional point to note is that most secondary schools operate with at least five primary level “feeder schools”. We will need to work out how we approach this at Lesedi, but it is inevitable that we will be accepting more children – not just those from Lesedi Primary. We are likely to have two streams of classes, perhaps one with a more academic focus and the other more vocational, however we will be doing further research on the best approach.

Moving on from our plans for a secondary school, you may recall that our final classroom block at Lesedi Primary was being funded by Grand Circle Foundation from donations made by visitors to Lesedi on OAT trips. Unfortunately, funds have run dry, and they have now asked us to complete the project on their behalf. There isn't too much left to do, so the classrooms should be completed by the time Grade 7 starts next month. Our other ongoing construction project is the completion of new sports facilities at Lesedi, comprising a netball court, basketball court and tennis court. There is also a practice wall for children to use when not on court.



Completing the 5th classroom block



New sports facilities being constructed

The final topic I want to mention is our new chicken project. It has taken seven years, but finally Benson has been approached by a local lady, seeking our support to set up co-operative style initiatives within the community. This is something we have been keen to encourage for a long time but there has never been any interest. We have started by supporting a chicken project (which is something we were about to establish anyway, thanks to a recent donation from two of our supporters). If this is successful then further projects are already under discussion, from a local cooperative making our school uniforms to another making hand sanitizer and soaps. We are excited to see how this evolves, as it has the potential to be an extremely positive development.

I think that is all our news for the time being. Thank you for reading through to the end. The past few months have been incredibly challenging, and I have no doubt further challenges await us. There has been much in the news to depress us each and every day and I know many of our supporters have felt very isolated since the start of the pandemic, with normal lives, activities and travel on hold. However, this pandemic has actually united us all in a way that would never otherwise have been possible. The care and love we have felt from supporters who have reached out to check on us in recent months has been truly heart-warming. The meaning of Lesedi is “light” and I certainly feel that the project has provided us all with light during this crisis.

Take care and stay healthy,

Fiona xx

A few photos to help transport you to Lesedi...



Graeme and Fiona at Lesedi



Benson with his special lockdown hair do :)



The school and gardens are looking fabulous



So cute...



Our new Dining/Community Hall. Temporarily being used by the Grade 6 class for lessons



Veggies being grown at Lesedi. The rains have started so hopefully we will have good crops this year



Inner courtyard at the Clinic



Tomatoes being cultivated by Sr Irene's husband – a skilled gardener



Sr Irene's cottage at the clinic – a shining example to the other teachers and nurses!



Part of the Lesedi School traditional village



Our hardworking school cooks



The new borehole – the pump is enclosed in very thick concrete. Security cameras are being installed.



And finally, some of our Lesedi children...



Face masks have been removed for the photos



*Wishing you a happy and healthy holiday season
with love and gratitude
from the Lesedi Team*