



2005

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2005 Summary

I went to Lesotho twice in 2005; in February/March, and again in December.

Sister Alice has been granted a two-year leave of absence from her Ministry of Education to work on Project Help Lesotho initiatives full time. During my absences, dear friends have solicited and obtained funding for me to work on these projects full time for the next year while we are working on larger proposals. The generosity and commitment of Canadians has been humbling and an irrefutable testimony to the reality that people have good hearts and do want to help – if only they can see a clear path.

The situation in Lesotho is worsening. It is projected to become the country with the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS. It is just so easy to make a difference!

Thank you - for reading these letters and for caring.

February 20 2005

We have now all arrived in Hlotse and there are four. Such a long way. It takes a full 60 hours from my home there to here. We have been welcomed in the touching Basotho fashion of humour and kindness.

To be back is wonderful. Such a difference between the lushness of summer here than the monotonous shades of brown of my visit in their winter in August. The land bears forth flowers, vegetables, grassy mountain slopes and a fuller sense of the hope of renewal. Luckily there has been a steady recurrence of rain over the past two months and the water shortage has eased considerably in many areas.

I am being reunited with my friends and am so happy to hear of their joys and sorrows. A young girl I had met at Guardian Angel Primary School has been constantly asking the nuns about my possible return and low she found me here working yesterday. She had written me a thoughtful letter tucked in with the ones I brought back to the pan pals at Rockcliffe Park School. I still have it. What a beautiful and smart young lady. We embraced and were pleased to see each other. I was touched by her efforts to see me and her determination to do well at school.

We have seen the 16 orphaned girls at St. Mary's Hostel, being supported by St. Bartholomew's Church. Our intern, Carolyn Kennedy is doing a terrific job engaging the kids, remediating their academic deficiencies, building esprit d' accord and falling in love with them. They are a cohesive and charming group of young ladies. Last night, after welcoming Sandra Bussiere and Cathy Mawson from the plane, Shelagh, Carolyn and I played singing games with them. It was such fun. We are looking forward to getting to know them better. Sister Mary Selina, who runs the Hostel, and the other Anglican nuns have grown fond of Carolyn and seem rejuvenated by the presence of an enthusiastic young woman. They each take me aside and confide what a great job she is doing!

I am reminded how difficult things are on a moment by moment basis. I have been having a painful time trying to connect on the internet. It takes forever and then when you do, it does not always load the pages. From our westward perspective, it causes some stress that people are waiting for replies. We have had to juggle our plans as there is not enough transportation for us all. Cathy and Sandra will rest and prepare this weekend and then head up on Monday to Guardian Angel (twinned with Rockcliffe Park Public School), then onto Mamohau (twinned with Philomen Wright High School), Mahlekefane (twinned with Bishop Hamilton Schools), Paray and Thaba Tseka to see Sefapanong Primary (twinned with Turnbull School) and a few other schools.

Alice and I will go to Maseru for a series of three days of meetings with the Rotary, chamber of Commerce, College of Education and others. Each of us has a different contribution to make and we are welcomed by everyone. We will stay with my friends Freda and Esau Sabetane in Maseru and return to Hlotse. The Basotho are such hospitable people.

It rained again, quite heavily, during the night. I woke up hoping that this was the beginning of the end of the drought. What a break that would be.

My meeting with Motlatsi in Johannesburg on the way here was most productive. I have drafted a proposal to unite expatriate young professionals Basotho in Canada and South Africa to return to Lesotho on a regular basis to talk to the youth about HIV/AIDS, motivation, leadership, staying in school etc. Motlatsi and Cliff Sabetane have mobilised 10-12 of their friends to start. It is so exciting to know that they are re-engaging in their country and have the potential to make such a difference.

Alice and I are planning our meetings here and our time in Canada. She is so excited about all the people she will meet, schools she will visit, churches she will address – and a little nervous! There is so much to be done! We will go together with Carolyn to all the twinned schools and other projects next week.

I have just read the Lesotho Budget which came out Feb 16 and see that the estimate of orphans in Lesotho at this time is approximately 90,000 and rising. It is being projected that the incidence of HIV/AIDS will soon make Lesotho the highest in the world.

I hope all is well in Canada and you are individually in my thoughts. It is wonderful to have this dedicated team of volunteers who are well prepared for their tasks ahead. There is much work to be done. It is such a joy to reconnect with the children and all those I have grown so fond of.

February 22 2005

We were at Guardian Angel Primary yesterday. Cathy gave her first workshops – and was a huge success! When I walked around, dozens of kids tugged at my shirt – “ ‘M’e Peg, ‘M’e Peg, do you knowso and so(my pen pal)?” Each knew the names of their pen pals and was so hoping that I would know of them too and be able to chat. It was such fun and we were all so happy to reunite. They did a wonderful dance with the drums for me. When I showed them the calendar photos again – they pointed out themselves and their friends with gales of laughter and giggling – “that’s me!!!!!! There I am! Look at me – aren’t I beautiful?”

We have had constant internet trouble and I am unable to get into my account. I have my fingers crossed that I will do so today. The rain has subsided but has hopefully been able to soak in before the sun dried the land again.

For the ladies arranging our trip to BC, Saltspring Island etc. the lack of communication here suggests that you should go ahead and make plans as I am finding it near impossible to get an email sent. I have just spend more than two hours getting this one out....but I was able to pick a peach off a tree today!

February 28 2005

Wednesday, the group will return from the mountains. We have only spoken briefly twice. They have been working hard.

Alice and I went to Maseru for meetings – with the head of Rotary and MacMillan Publishing Lesotho, the College of Education, Scripture Union, Customs (about the book shipment – and endless and tedious journey through the bureaucracy), the Lesotho Council of NGO’s, Durham Link etc. Although interesting, it is not nearly as much fun as seeing the children!

The most exciting thing is that Cliff Sebatane (my Mosotho friend in Montreal who was with us for Christmas), he has engaged his childhood friend, Motlatsi Makhakhe, from Johannesburg. Both are the ages of my two eldest sons (26). They have started an email forum to engage now more than 50 well educated, professional young Basotho in South Africa, Lesotho, and of course, Cliff in Canada. Motlatsi and I have been emailing for months and finally met in Joburg on my way through. He has put an impressive effort into arranging meetings for us. He traveled at his own expense to Maseru to ferry us around for 2.5 days and has been a great help. It is so exciting to know young successful Basotho are willing to give back to their country in this way. They are working on some ideas and we will follow this forward in conjunction with the Project Help Lesotho initiatives. They will go to the schools, camps etc to inspire the youth, as well as pursue some other exciting possibilities. This group is eclectic –

engineers, lawyers, accountants, bankers, investment professionals etc., with many valuable skills sets to offer. We went down to Matsieng to the high school under Prince Seeiso's eye.

We have had an enthusiastic reception from Rotary and we will speak briefly at their weekly meeting if there is time next week. Rotary here is doing some wonderful projects. The College of Education is preparing responses to the inquiries from the University of Ottawa, Faculty of Education. Shelagh is speaking to the Paray Nursing School to answer my sister Anne's queries about their clinical education, and I am approaching the technical school about the queries regarding the setting up of a bee keeping business, etc. Our mountain ladies (Carolyn, Shelagh, Sandra, and Cathy) are collecting data on orphans, schools, constituencies (called districts), and regional support organizations for children. Cathy has been so well received and educators are desperate for help with maths and sciences. It is a national problem and there is rarely help for it.

While in Maseru we hooked up with Madika Nkeube (Manko, I will send you her picture when I have the chance) and Halieo Ralebese, both of whom have lived for years in Canada. Involving Basotho in this is a blessing and it is a real joy to meet such lovely and caring people – each is working tirelessly for the poor. As more and more people walk along side of us in this, I am nourished by the quality of people we meet. By definition, anyone who is interested in helping is a good person – as there is nothing in it for him or her.

There is a Canadian Sister of another order, Sister Christa Mary, staying here at the convent who has been working as a nurse and midwife in South Africa for decades. She is my age and a riot – smart as a whip and so dedicated to the sick mothers and babies....of which there are so many here. She has been working with the Canadian contingent (R. Birnbaum, R Armstrong, Dr. Berger etc) from the Ontario Hospital Association. (Lehana, we have met with Dr. Lekane and she sends her regards. She was so excited to think we were working on a proposal to involve youth).

Tomorrow, Alice and I go to Maseru to meet with Madika again, the 'Value' Added Tax (VAT) people, and are intending to get as much packed in as possible in one day. It is about 1.5 hrs. each way. They are doing road construction and so we must go through South Africa and then back. It is a beautiful drive....the mountains and fields are from another time – they invoke thoughts of centuries gone by and perhaps unsettling history.

Wednesday, when the girls come 'down', we will have a wee birthday party for Shelagh. I have balloons, a few things from Canada and a few simple things from the supermarket here (nothing you can imagine). The Sisters are getting a cake.

I wish each one the best. Jesse, I hope your move has gone well. Luc – thanks for the email. Sandy, I am thinking of you and the up and coming operation. My frustration with the internet is at an all time high – although I was able to get through now.

PS I just heard now that Lesotho announced that it is going to re-open a High Commission in Ottawa!

March 1 2005

We went to Maseru today – through South Africa – it is beautiful beyond description. Our meetings were productive. We met and made appointments for next week with Television Lesotho, Radio

Lesotho, Catholic Radio (we got an hour program plus interest in a weekly spot), The Public Eye Newspaper (widely read – comparable to the Globe), did some errands and had a 45 minute private audience with King Letsie III at the Royal Palace in Maseru. He had received my response to his last letter and the calendar and appeared well versed on our activities. It was a cordial exchange and he promised to help us (although no specifics). We even managed to squeeze in a short visit with Sr. Alice's younger sister Rosalia – a wonderful young teacher. On the drive home I was able to get the cake for Shelagh.

We drove home in a spectacular storm. Apparently the combination of altitude, wind and dryness is responsible for the renowned lightening storms. Just prior to it beginning, the sky was a riot of colour – clouds ablaze, sending wide rays of coloured light streaming across the sky. And then it began!

The wind picked up to an almost frightening clip, followed by thunder and lightning on all sides. I began to see why people are so anxious about these storms I have read and heard so much about. I confess to having been cavalier about it as someone who always enjoyed storms and was duly humbled by my insensitivity – these are nothing to take lightly. The whole sky crackled, even sparks flying. I have read of the number of people killed annually from lightening and know that Alice's young 15 year old brother was killed by lightening a number of years ago. The rain turned to increasingly larger pieces of hail pounding on the truck. Sister Christina drove and did an admirable job getting us home. All is well!

March 3 2005

We had a lovely party for Shelagh's birthday. The nuns set up the room in a festive way, the meal was wonderful and lots of laughs. Shelagh was brought to tears! The levity was welcome.

March 4: Alice, Carolyn, Shelagh and I went to visit the Sewing Group, supported by St. George's Anglican Church. They were expecting us and sang for us again. Their choir has grown and is quite remarkable. The group now has three stages. They were appreciative of the visit and the financial loans toward self-sufficiency.

Our visit to Bokoro, twinned with Ridgemont High School, was such a joy. I got to congratulate and give Canadian pins to the 'Building a Futures' Award Winners from last term, was given a selection from the choir, a Basotho 'rap' demonstration and a poetry reading of "Let me not to marriage of true minds admit impediments". I was surprised to say the least! What Mary Grace Mokefane, the principal, has done with that small school is outstanding. It has grown from 63 students two years ago when she took over, to 150 last year, to 210 this year. The grounds are spotless, the atmosphere is high. The mantra is "**We are going to make it!**" I have had numerous visits with her over my stay this time and continue to marvel at her faith, determination, and pride in her students.

Our final stop for the day was at St. Charles High School, during a sports day. Several other schools were there doing soccer, track etc. The kids were having a ball. I was able to see the physical damage to the buildings affected by the tremor in late October. The holes in the ceilings and floor are gaping and meander across the surfaces. The government people have come to look at them but it remains to be seen whether they will provide funding for the repairs. The ones on the walls are the most dangerous for the students. The village of Seboche and the trip to the sewing group were magical. From the variegated shades of brown in August winter, this time the vibrant greens and flowers made a spectacular backdrop for the charming Basotho huts scattered throughout the hills. Tolkien would have been inspired – or should I say Peter Jackson!

Saturday, I met with Donald of the Technical school and my young friend Patricia. Donald and I have been making plans for volunteers to come over and ways to help his school. He is a really good man. He has allowed a group of women and children living with HIV/AIDS to use his field at the school to grow vegetables for their sustenance. He seems always to be doing for others. His recent heart problems are sad – as he waits for funding miracles for a pacemaker. I like him a lot. I agreed to give a leadership workshop Monday for his staff as they are having some problems.

Sunday, I attended the 8 am English Anglican service with Carolyn, Shelagh, Sandra, and Cathy. It is almost dour and not nearly as much fun as the Sesotho but I can take communion and understand some of it. The sermon is a random mix of English and Sesotho. It is customary for me to have Tea or lunch with the Sisters of the Holy Name (Anglican). It seems Carolyn and I always have work to do and little time to get everything done. No rest for the wicked!

Monday, Francis and I rose at 5:30 am to drive to the village of Mamohau for 7:30. It is an extraordinarily beautiful drive – rather like Austria with Basotho huts scattered around. Mamohau High School, twinned with Philomen Wright in Hull, is a residential school for children from the mountains or those who have no homes. We have 7 orphans there, whom I visited with (sponsored by Ruth, Phyllis and John, Charles and Deb, Shauna, Estelle and Mom). The principal, Ntate Koali is totally on board and up to speed with this initiative. He has a lead teacher (Mape) and has set up his bank account (each project here must have a separate bank account for Project Help Lesotho before receiving funds). I got 217 letters from students to bring back to the grade nines at Philomen Wright and lots of enthusiasm.

We then travelled to Mahlekefane, the primary school twinned with Bishop Hamilton Schools. BHS has taken on this – the poorest of schools. All will be more difficult there as they have so little and are so remote. The principal, 'M'e Ratia, is a dedicated, tenacious woman. She was delighted to get Alison Goss' letter. She sleeps in the storage hut with the bags of meale-meal for the orphans from the World Food Program (WFP). I had such fun and was delighted to spend several hours with the children – some of whom are in the calendar. We are going to write a proposal for her to get another classroom or two as there is one tent and two small one-room buildings with dirt floors. The poverty is painful. 'Me' Ratia is cheerful and trusting in providence to help her school. She insisted on giving me a live chicken to take with me on my travels!

The drive to Paray was difficult – on a road fit for cattle. One imagines the few remaining brain cells dissolving into the fractures in the spinal column! It is about a 4-hour drive. We picked up a young girl running down a mountainside asking for a lift and found she was followed immediately by two others. They were headed for the clinic about four villages and a two-hour walk away. Had we not picked them up, they would have been walking in the dark all that way, vulnerable to the shepherds and others roaming the hills. It made me shudder.

The southern skies are filled with light. Although I was unable to identify many constellations, it was breathtaking to see the total darkness illuminated by so many stars. I was relieved to arrive safely at the convent in Paray.

Our next day began early so that we could arrive at Sefapanong, the school twinned with Turnbull School. The school is about a 30 minute drive from the village of Paray, with the last 2k really a trail filled with boulders. The teachers and children were delighted to get the letters so carefully written and prepared for them by Turnbull. Mary Ann's family had given some funds to be used for chickens, pigs, and some

will be used for book shelves for those we are sending in a couple of weeks. The library is about the size of a front hall. She will fix the hole in the tin roof before the books come, as there was a puddle of water on the floor. 'M'e Mamoipone is dynamic and totally committed to the twinning. It is an excellent match and I know will be a wonderful experience.

Alice's mother is a grade one teacher there with 113 students in her class. She brought lunch for Francis and myself! Although everyone had their letters ready, I waited for the responses to the most recent letters. The school built their chicken coup by each student paying for one concrete block. Her dream is to build a hall to rent out to the community to make money for the school. She plans to sell extra eggs to get more money to feed the children.

As many children have had to stay out of school for various reasons, there are children in wide age range in each class. In the same class, there may be kids from 11-18 in Standard (grade) five.

March 9 2005

I had a good meeting yesterday with Sister Marie Annunciata at the Paray Nursing School. They are beside themselves with excitement about the books to arrive soon. I told her of all the people who worked so hard to collect books for various destinations and that they were given, collected, sorted, and packed with love. So many want me to convey thanks and love to their Canadian friends.

We descended to Maseru on a road (the 'other' alternative from Paray) I have not taken before. It was incredible beautiful scenery but the road was just awful. It was a four-hour drive with 1.5 without a single tree. It rather reminded me of central Norway - lots of goats, shepherds, low flowering scrubs and panoramic vistas. It feels like being on top of the world when one can see so far into the mountain valleys. Francis tried once to get a radio station on a high plateau and lowland- behold it was a French station. I started to laugh. He has no idea where it was coming from. Imagine!

During the first 1.5 hours, we had one truck on our side and two facing us at different points. We stopped and picked up various women and their babies and took them to the next clinic. Hospital and clinic roofs are red so that one walking can see where to go from a long distance. In the mountains of Lesotho, directions are entirely related to topography: one goes 'up' or 'down'. A location is on 'this side' or 'that side'.

Our visit to Maseru was very successful. Alice was on radio on two different stations and we have an article coming out this Friday in the Public Eye (a widely read newspaper). We have arranged publicity for the arrival of the books. Our last meeting with the College of Education was positive. I have just met with the leader of the Lesotho Teacher Trade Union and have visited the Bytown Orphanage.

Saturday -We are all working hard. I have looking forward to seeing Sandra, Shelagh, Cathy and Carolyn for dinner. I know they will regale me with stories of their week. Sandy, I am thinking of you and your operation and praying that it is a huge success. Everyone has been wonderful I feel so at home here and am delighted with all that has happened since my last visit. There are kinks to work out but we have many new supporters here in Lesotho –many in high places. It has been really rewarding.

We will go to the airport tomorrow to get Julie Poskitt for her 6 weeks stay. People are so excited about her workshops and contribution. We have made all the arrangements and know that she will be well

received. Monday, I give the leadership workshop and then attend four schools – Guardian Angel, those twinning with Fielding and Saltspring Island. Alice is preparing for her time in Canada. It has been a busy time.

The email problems have prohibited me from replying to your emails and I ask your patience. I hope all is well.

December 15 2005

My greetings to you all and a Merry Christmas from Lesotho. It does not seem like Christmas week here. The weather hovers around 27-29 degrees and sunny. Other than a few Christmas decorations in Maseru, there are no signs of commercialism or actually of the season. The town square in Maseru and the main street have a few lights. It is a far cry from the excessive commercialism and bustle of Canada. I hear from many of you that there is lots of snow and cold days. I look forward to Christmas here in its simplicity. I have a small gift for each one of the Canadians with Help Lesotho: a nice bottle of wine and a wonderful feeling that this will suffice. I also look forward to the church services in Sesotho and English and the wishes of many friends. It is a different world. The holiday here involved feasting, church and much visiting with family. My eldest son, Jesse, arrives in Hlotse Sunday, so I am blessed to have Christmas with him.

I hesitate to write at length, as you will be busy with your Christmas preparations and may not have time to read an epistle. I have been here now, this time, for three very busy weeks. After the arduous journey, it is wonderful to be back among many friends. We were joyously welcomed. After a seven-hour wait at the Johannesburg airport, Carolyn Kennedy and I met from our separate flights and were driven to Hlotse by a driver and Sister Alice's second-youngest sister, Kabelo, who is going into her fourth year of medicine in Malawi. (My friend Sheryl Selwyn has been helping Kabelo by purchasing her medical textbooks and now a laptop.) Although I have been corresponding for over a year with her, we had never had the chance to meet before—so that was my first surprise.

We were welcomed by Mel Theriault, Gail Whitbeck and the Anglican nuns at the guest house. The Sisters of Charity had a wonderful dinner for us on the next evening. Sister Alice was anxious to have news of many of you. She is very busy with convent business. The St. Mary's girls (the 16 orphans sponsored by St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church in Ottawa) were delighted to have us back, particularly Carolyn, whom they had missed so much. I was taken with the growth in health, confidence, English language and group cohesion—well remembering them when they began their collective journey together 12 months ago. They are lovely girls, each special in her own way.

It was so fun to see Mel, who has been here for three of her six months' internship (she is the reason Jesse has come for Christmas). Mel has worked hard, making many friends and providing valuable administrative and project support. She is a dear soul. I have enjoyed watching her adjust to this very complex culture, and grow and stretch herself. Lesotho is a place of many contradictions and nuances. It takes time, love, understanding and an open heart to be here—not to mention patience galore. Mel has done a great job and is excited to have us here as the pace picks up. We have much to do over the next while. She and Carolyn have become a good team with complementary skills and dispositions. Two days after my arrival, I was hampered by a rather violent gastrointestinal reaction to inadvertently eating mouse feces, which had apparently been in the bottom of a pot the group was using to make

grilled cheese sandwiches. It took five days to recover fully and therefore set me back in my work and letter-writing. I was fussed over constantly by the nuns and our kind Canadian group.

Gail Whitbeck was still at the guest house. She has been volunteering for the past few months as an accountant, going to each project leader to ensure financial accountability. She even gives computer lessons on the side! Gail has been so well appreciated by each project leader for her gentle manner and expertise. She has loved her stay here. All volunteers write exit reports so that those coming after them can pick up in as seamless a fashion as possible.

I did make it to Maseru after a few days but was not yet recovered. It took me a while to regain my strength. I stayed for two days at Freda and Esau Sebetane's (Cliff's parents), who are always welcoming. I was able to see Sue Veit and Maeve Hancey, who had been volunteering for two months at the Bytown Orphanage on the outskirts of Maseru (sponsored by the Belleville Quinte Chapter of Help Lesotho). They were well bonded with the children, and I later heard from Sister Margaret and many others that they have been a huge blessing to the orphanage and each child there. Unfortunately, there are no adult resources to address the psychological, emotional and social needs of the orphans. Sue and Maeve made a real difference in the final marks of the children and in their literacy development and sense of being cared for. Sue also worked in the preschool, while Maeve helped Sister Margaret write proposals and generate new opportunities. Their leave-taking was a sad event, as they were well loved.

During the last two weeks, I have hosted Laura Edgar of the Institute on Governance as we begin the Youth Against HIV/AIDS community governance initiative funded by CIDA. This was Laura's opportunity to meet the Basotho, to become aware of the needs and opportunities here and to participate in the first national Steering Committee Meeting. We have managed to hold meetings with King Letsie III; the Deputy Prime Minister; the Minister of Gender, Youth and Sports; key persons in the ministries of Local Government; the CEO of the National AIDS Secretariat; the Deputy Principal Secretary of Foreign Affairs (who had us to his home for a wonderful dinner cooked by his beautiful Ethiopian wife—some of you may remember him from his visit to Ottawa in November); the Lesotho Council of NGO; the Lesotho Youth Federation; the United Nations Development Program (UNDP); the Commonwealth Games and Lesotho Olympic Association; and the Society of International Partnerships for AIDS in Africa (SIPPA—a division of ActionAIDS). We have had a great deal of background support for introductions to various important persons from my friends Dr. Lehana Thabane at McMaster University; Dr. Motlatsi Morolong, President of McMillan Publishers in Lesotho, and Ntate Thebang Lekhela from Foreign Affairs. Without their enthusiastic and efficient help, we would not have been able to manage so much so quickly.

This was my third visit with the King. He remains cordial and warmly received us. I have asked the King if he and his wife will come to the Help Lesotho Leadership Camp we are hosting in January (13-17). He has assured me he will if he can fit it into his schedule. The written invitation has been formally extended, so we will see. There is so much protocol involved that I am keen it not distract from the sessions the kids and teachers are having. There would have to be media, etc. I am of two minds. I thought this would encourage the mountain people, because the King knows them and their plight. The Minister of Gender has asked to be invited as well, and that could compound things again.... We will see.

Russell Armstrong from Ottawa (the Hospital Administrator of the 'Tsepong Clinic in Hlotse where the Ontario Hospital Association has a clinic to introduce anti-retroviral drugs) had us all for a spectacular dinner at his home. He picked up me, Laura, Gail, Sue and Maeve in his tiny car.... I am sure the underside was scraping along the ground! We all so appreciated his well-appointed home and wonderful home-

cooked repast. The food at the Anglican guest house is good but rather bland and repetitive (although we are glad to have it).

Today, we had the first Steering Committee meeting, and all went well. The representation was good, the spirit positive; the discussion fulsome and; as in so many meetings, the resolution was to have an extra meeting in January while I am still here so that the members can more carefully review all the materials.

I placed an advertisement for the position of the Basotho Coordinator for the CIDA project in the national newspaper, *The Public Eye*, and have been inundated with responses. So many here are underemployed and unemployed. This is an excellent job with a decent salary. There will be lots of training and opportunities to meet Canadians and Basotho leaders on various levels. At every possible moment, between meetings, I am interviewing people here and in Hlotse. I have about six or seven interviews tomorrow and more in Hlotse on Monday and Tuesday. I will close off the process and make a decision by the end of the week. The choice of the person is hugely important to the project, and I hope the right one emerges.

On Saturday, Laura is renting a car (this will be my second time driving in Lesotho—a rather precarious adventure) so that we can go touring to some spots before she leaves on Sunday. I will take her to the burial place of the nation's founder, Chief Moshoeshe, as well as to the ancient bushman caves and a few traditional weaving and craft centres. I am looking forward to having a day off. On Sunday, Laura leaves for Canada, and Jesse and Cliff arrive from there. Cliff is the new intern for the next six months. His parents, Freda and Esau, were studying in Nova Scotia when he was born in 1978, so he has Canadian citizenship and is therefore eligible for the internship program. He has lived all his life in Maseru, gained a business degree from Cape Town and has been living in Montreal for the past three years. He is a terrific young man, of course, Sesotho speaking, an orphan sponsor and a good friend. He spent last Christmas with the boys and me. He is an excellent addition to the team.

Over the next two weeks, we will all be working on project reviews, preparing for the leadership camp and drawing up plans and accountability practices/schedules for the next six to nine months. It will be a nice time to work without so many competing demands. I am looking forward to spending more time with our project leaders and orphans—each one is special, and I never seem to have enough time to visit with them individually.

Carolyn is thrilled to be back after her six-month absence and did not miss a step in throwing herself into the problem-solving processes required. One of our girls has gotten pregnant, and we have spent much time trying to sort this out. Here in Lesotho, a girl must leave school for the rest of the year and the following year. This one is so smart and motivated—it is such a shame. She has just turned 16. She has two parents dying of AIDS and no place to go. The punitive approach, both from the school and from the home environment, is destructive and can break many a strong spirit. We are doing all we can. During the second week of January, we have many volunteers coming and lots of preparation for them. Transport and accommodation are huge problems. I will be setting up an office for the CIDA project, and to date we cannot find an available/suitable/safe location. It is disheartening. I am trying to find a large house so that we can house both initiatives together for economy of scale and have bedrooms for interns and volunteers. This will keep everyone under one roof when they are in Hlotse—far safer and more efficient. One does not go out at night, so if there is a distance to walk from work to home it seriously cuts down on the time available to get things done and collaborate.

As I close, I want to wish you all a happy and special Christmas and New Year. We all have so much to be grateful for. Last night, while Laura and I were sharing a cheap pizza on an outdoor bench, a gorgeous young boy about eight years old came up and asked for food. Here this is a serious request. When we gave him a piece, his face was that of tender gratitude. I wanted to take him home. Orphans are wandering the streets with no place to go, no one to give them kindness or nourishment of any variety.

Every time I go to the Internet café, I get emails (please be patient with my replies) telling me of children in Canada, of churches, schools and individuals raising money for the orphans and projects Help Lesotho is supporting. I cannot thank you all enough. I want you to know, especially at Christmas, that the need here is heartbreaking and your contributions are making a huge difference, individually and cumulatively. Bless each one, and know that you are thanked over and over here by children and others who would otherwise have no hope.

Rea leboha. Sala hantle. (We thank you. Go in health.)
Selemo se secha setle. (Happy New Year.)

December 18 2005

5:15 am: Laura leaves today. I will drive up to Hlotse with Freda and Cliff Sebatane. Cliff starts work today: a life-changing experience.

Yesterday, we rented a car and drove to the burial place of the nation's founder, Chief Moshoeshoe. The roads are either not marked at all or are poorly marked. The drive was spectacular. These ancient mountains never cease to amaze me. Each one has a particular shape of its own. Massive boulders are precariously perched in seemingly random arrays of positions—on top, beside, over the mountains. One wonders how they got there, what life was like then and how these boulder-sculptures are attached. The area between Maseru and this famous mountain, Thaba Bosiu (Mountain of the Night), boasts wide valleys and multi-coloured fields—from black to bright red, from khaki to rust. Huge, imposing aloe vera plants boarder the fields and pepper the mountainsides. We did manage to find the tourist hut and get directions for the climb. It took us about two and a half hours in the baking sun.

The first portion is an arduous vertical climb up a path composed entirely of small rocks. One must pick one's way carefully. As I had brought a few work clothes to Maseru, I was in a skirt and sandals—not ideal. Laura was much more sensibly attired in runners and jeans. We were, however, lathered with sunscreen and had lots of water. As we began the ascent, a gentleman named Tebello joined us, explaining that he was the guide. His father and his grandfather before him had been the "hosts of the mountain," telling travelers and pilgrims of the 200-year-old history of his people. In the end, we were delighted with his quiet, informative presence.

It was a tough climb, and we were glad to reach the summit of this flat-topped mountain where Chief Moshoeshoe had brought his people to keep them safe. The plateau is vegetated with multi-coloured grasses, aloe vera, cacti, bushes and even one enormous tree planted in the sacred circle by a priest from France. The vista is spectacular. There are three springs on this side, and the top is entirely defensible. No one could approach unexpectedly. Our ascent and one other were the only way to get up. All other surfaces are steep crags of jagged mountain sides. There is one cave on the side where the chief's wives (140 of them) and children hid from danger when necessary. On the top of this is the burial ground with perhaps 50 identifiable graves. Each grave is covered with stones in a cairn a couple of feet high. Chief

Moshoeshoe's is about three feet high. Close to him is the grave of King Moshoeshoe II, the present King's father who was killed in a car accident in 1996. The area around his cairn is marble with a fence and a couple of inscribed Sesotho prayers of peace. There are ruins of the original stone huts and "four-corner" houses (an innovation from the French priest). From one side, one could see a conical mountain, standing in isolation, with one of those boulders on top—the exact replica of the famous Basotho hat—whence this proud national symbol comes.

Our descent took us around the side of the mountain to see the Bushmen drawings on the underbelly of a huge rock. We had to watch our steps carefully. It would have been easy to slip or twist an ankle. We heard stories of cannibals and the inhabitants of the mountaintop having to farm on the flat lands and haul all the produce up these climbs. It boggles the mind. We wandered our way through one of the most picturesque villages I have seen to return to our point of origin. It was a wonderful morning, and we were glad we had made the effort.

We got back in our rented clunker—which was losing my respect by the minute—to find our next point of call. We were looking for the famous caves of the Bushmen on the brochures. We drove the directions we were advised to...no signs. We asked various people, turned around a couple of times and finally were pointed to a dirt road (no signage and no visible indicators that more than ten cars had ever been down there). We persisted through incredibly beautiful valleys and climbs. Again, we had to turn around, and one taxi suggested we follow them. At one point, the degree of ascent on this rutted dirt road and the angle of the turn were more than this "blank-blank" car could take, and it stalled going up a very steep part. I rolled it back a bit, tried several times—no luck.

The taxi—this is the public transport: densely crowded vans, which pick people up anywhere and drop them wherever they want—stopped. Laura cleverly suggested she get out. If we had not been able to get enough traction on the stones, it would have been hundreds of feet to back down this steep mountainside to a place where we could take another run at it. Not fun. It worked. I gunned it up the mountain to the first flat space. Laura had to walk. She said the climb was reminiscent of our Thabo Bosiu adventure. This car—a Chico—badly needed the timing readjusted and was stalling from time to time. It is why four-wheel drive vehicles are so imperative here once you get off the few tarred roads. To make a very long story come to an end, we found the right road, but no one could tell us if it was 30 or 60 minutes—and again, no sign of previous life. I did not have the confidence in the car to proceed on such a desolate journey in the event that we had trouble—these two white *makhooa* (white foreigners)—so we turned back and proceeded to the weaving coop where Laura could see the traditional hangings and mats made in the country.

It was a fun day off, and, other than three hours from 4:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. when I worked, it was my first full day off, ending in a lovely meal at the fanciest hotel here. We had to return the car to the Lesotho Sun Hotel, so we saved our food budget for the past couple of days to afford the luxury. Good wine, an amazing Indian dish and great service....a wonderful day in all.

I am ready to go back to the mountains though. Three weeks of meetings is beyond a healthy tolerance, and I have much to do in the field. Jesse will arrive today as well.

December 27 2005

I hope that you all have had a lovely Christmas. You might be surprised at how many of you are in our thoughts and conversations.

To recap, upon returning to Hlotse, I interviewed about 15 more applicants for the YAH Basotho Coordinator position. It brings to 25 the number I have interviewed and over 50 applicants. People have been streaming here, so desperate for a job. Almost without reading the job description, they go to real efforts to convince me that they will be the right person. The responsibilities on their shoulders weigh heavily as I talk to them. It is a respectable salary, and their needs are great. There were some excellent candidates who had lots of experience but lacked either the English or the technology skills required. In the end, I have offered the position to a gentleman named Liabo (pronounced Diabo; "li" is pronounced "d" in Sesotho) Letseka who seems of the right spirit, experience and disposition. It is a challenging job, and he will have to work hard. I have a day-long session with him on Thursday.

As well, I leave shortly for Maseru to, among other things, offer a lovely young woman the position of HL Coordinator. After much thought, it is evident that the organization has grown to the point that we will not be able to maintain financial transparency and accountability, as well as look after so many projects and orphans, unless we have excellent and consistent support on the ground. I hope she accepts the position and the amount we are able to pay. I think she would be perfect. We are only able to do this through the generosity of the Carleton County Law Society funds raised at their annual charity event. Rob Nelson is responsible for this, and I cannot thank him enough.

Carolyn and Cliff went off on public transport this morning to meet with our young pregnant girl to gain more information so that we can know how to proceed. They will have to take five "taxis" before they join Maeve and me in Maseru. They have taken some food for the family, which has nothing. I think Mel and Jesse are going with Maeve and me in a very small car with all Maeve's luggage. They want to sight-see in Maseru, and I have much work to do. Carolyn and Cliff will join us there. Carolyn and I have to get our visas worked out.

On Christmas Eve day and Christmas day, people strolled leisurely in their finest outfits on the street. All business seemed to slow to a stop. People visited each other. One cannot help wishing them some respite from the stress and weight of so much death and grief.

Our Christmas was wonderful—easy and so much fun. On Christmas Eve, Carolyn and I went to the Anglican service here. We anticipated it would not start on time (it was supposed to start at 8:30 p.m. and go until 1:00 a.m.). We leisurely sauntered in after 9:00 p.m. and joined about 20 people there. We stayed about 30 minutes, during which one after the other slowly slouched into a prone position on the bench and went to sleep—no priest, no music, no spirit. We could see that some were very prayerful and really sick, but others seemed detached. Apparently it did start at some point, but we did not have the patience to wait. On Christmas morning, Maeve and I went to the Sesotho Catholic service. It was packed and lovely. I continue to admire and enjoy the harmony and participation of the congregation. Christmas here is feasting, church and family. The gift-giving is confined to a new outfit for children, where possible.

Our gift-giving was special; each small thing was chosen with care. It was nice to have Cliff's girlfriend, Luntu, here from Kimberly, South Africa. There were the seven of us. The day was hot; the company excellent.

Jesse and Cliff slaughtered and bled a sheep in the back garden with the help of the convent gardener. They took off the skin, dismembered the poor thing and saved each portion. It was a small ram, and I think Jesse intends to bring back the horns and skin. Here the brain and intestines are delicacies, so the gardener got those for his trouble. The butcher cut it up, and we barbecued it for Christmas dinner. Sister Alice and another nun joined us. Everyone made something. We had many visitors over the week and during the festive days. Many of the Sisters of Charity and friends from various locations dropped by. People brought cards and best wishes. Our little cottage seems like Grand Central Station as we sit here and work.

After dinner, Mel and Jesse had planned a number of silly, mostly African, games (carrying water on our heads, sweeping dirt in a competition, etc). We laughed for hours. It was really fun. I know that everyone enjoyed the day. Various Anglican Sisters came by. I think many would have liked to join us but wouldn't allow themselves to. We did share our treats with them, and they seemed pleased. The difference between the Roman Catholic and the Anglican congregation of nuns is remarkable. The former are exemplars of kindness, outreach, fun and "God in action." The latter are withdrawn from the outer community, sedentary in their socialization and somewhat isolated in their activities. It is quite sad, really, although we love many of them individually.

As I leave for Maseru, the flowers are bursting outside the window. The grounds at the convent are resplendent in massive hydrangeas, calla lilies, roses, etc. Lesotho is remarkably beautiful in so many ways. The birds are singing as I write, and I have a moment of quiet. We have been working hard to prepare for the IOG/CIDA initiative and all the Help Lesotho projects to unfold (leadership camp, volunteers coming and financial accountability measures). In Maseru, I will meet with the new High Commissioner to Ottawa. I am looking forward to that. Always lots to do!

Joan Ramsay Burns and her quilting group made 150 lovely drawstring bags for orphans. Each is of strong cotton, in a vibrant and cheerful pattern, with a label sewn on so that we can write the child's name. We are taking 50 to the Bytown orphanage today, each with a new and soft face cloth inside. The children have no place to put personal things. The group did a wonderful job, and I thank them. We have enough to give one to each of our sponsored children.

To date, we have been unable to secure a place for an office and sleeping quarters. We have asked, met with and seen so many places. We really need a large house so that people can work and have a place to stay that is safe and suitable for a productive environment. It is becoming a concern that we may not find one.

As we continue to see the need here, the hunger and the increasing poverty, we speak often of the people in Canada who care enough to help. This has been a remarkable journey for me in appreciating, firstly, how many ways there are to help, and, secondly, how kind people are. I repeatedly tell people here of the Canadians who work and pray for them. It is encouraging and becoming a constant for many. One poor old lady I know well said yesterday, "Really, we are all the same family—I did not realize!" I continue to be awed by the courage and selflessness of so many I know here. I wonder if Canadians would take distantly related children by the threes and fours into our homes to raise to adulthood. Would we sacrifice our own dreams and plans, without hesitation, to support the school fees of our second cousin's children? The man I hired for the YAH is still in his twenties but has looked after two young nieces for years after his sister died of AIDS. The sacrifice of these people makes one feel small and inadequate.

As an aside, or, rather, to the point, I include a poem written by a child at the Bytown Orphanage:

Death

Why are you ugly?
You took my parents,
You left me alone,
Now I am an orphan.
I don't have some food to eat,
I don't have shelter to live.
If it was not for you,
I think I wouldn't be here.
I am now insulted by everybody,
Everything which is rotten I eat,
Everything which is broken I live in.

Death, I don't like you with all my heart
With all my heart.

Exinia Letseleha, aged 12

I wish you all a Happy New Year. May this coming year bring some form of renewal and rededication to what you truly want for the directions of your lives.... It is such a short time we have. Thank you always and daily for your support, prayers and friendship. I feel truly blessed.

NOTE – the December 2005 trip letters continue in 2006