

# Help Lesotho receives royal attention

King Letsie III of Lesotho is to pay a highly unusual private visit to Ottawa to mark the fifth anniversary of a small grassroots organization and personally thank its staff and volunteers for the work they have done in his country, Louisa Taylor writes.

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## Visit from a king

Lesotho is poor and stricken with HIV and AIDS, but its king is visiting Ottawa to thank a local aid agency for its efforts to help.



DENNIS LEUNG, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN



Lesotho's king is visiting Ottawa to thank aid agencies for help efforts

**Photograph by:** Dennis Leung, The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — The first time Peg Herbert met King Letsie III of Lesotho, it was an unexpected audience in his tiny mountain nation. She joked later that she was “seriously underdressed” for that 2004 encounter, but very enthusiastic.

This time, Herbert has a suitably regal outfit ready to go and she's even more excited. This time, King Letsie III is coming to see her.

“We're all incredulous that the king would do this,” says Herbert, founder of the Ottawa-based agency Help Lesotho. Herbert is planning to wear a traditional seshoeshoe (se-shway-shway) gown to the Help Lesotho anniversary dinner the king will be attending on Monday night at the University of Ottawa.

“This is very unusual, unprecedented, really. It's very humbling.”

No wonder. How often does a king from another continent travel to Ottawa to mark the fifth anniversary of a small grassroots organization and personally thank its staff and volunteers for the work they have done in his country?

King Letsie III arrives Thursday, and stays five days. It's a private occasion, not a state visit, although he is scheduled to pay Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean a courtesy call and have lunch with Speaker of the House of Commons, Peter Milliken. King Letsie III will travel lightly — just five advisers and staff, according to the high commission. His wife, Queen 'Masenate Mohato Seeiso, and their children will not be joining him.

In addition to the gala dinner, the king will attend an event at the Turnbull School, which is twinned with a school in Lesotho, part of his mission to visit and thank many of the organizations and volunteers behind Help Lesotho, the small development agency founded by Herbert to support programs in the landlocked country in southern Africa.

Lesotho has the third-highest rate of HIV/AIDs in the world, with 23 per cent of its population infected with the virus. The disease has virtually wiped out a generation, decimating Lesotho's social structure and leaving countless grandmothers to raise their children's children, in an atmosphere of extreme poverty.

"His majesty is coming to Ottawa to thank the thousands of Canadians who have been generous in supporting projects in the kingdom of Lesotho, and a significant reason for him to be coming at this moment is that Help Lesotho is celebrating its fifth-year anniversary," says Moshe Kao, Lesotho's acting high commissioner in Ottawa. "His visit also declares that Lesotho is very serious on issues of HIV and AIDS."

Herbert, a trained psychologist who has worked with disadvantaged populations throughout her career, first heard of Lesotho through Sister Alice Mputsoe, a young nun who came to Ottawa to pursue a master's degree in 2000. Herbert was teaching one of the classes Mputsoe took and it was through her student that Herbert learned of the struggle to feed, clothe and educate the orphans, to provide their grandmothers with support, and to increase knowledge of HIV and its dangers.

When Mputsoe returned to Lesotho, Herbert told her she'd love to help in any way she could. The result was a six-week trip to Lesotho in 2004. Herbert travelled the country, teaching workshops and learning about Lesotho.

"I was just struck by how many fine people I met, how many extraordinary leaders were holding their entire communities together with nothing but sheer force of will, in conditions of unbelievable poverty and misery," says Herbert. "I was struck by the sheer number of orphans and how destitute they were, and I came home with a list of ideas and projects."

When Herbert got home, she began talking to groups, churches, and schools. Her audiences learned that in Lesotho the life expectancy is 37. Herbert told them about the many income-earners who have died, the children they leave behind, and the grandmothers too weak to harvest their produce.

St. Bartholomew's Church on MacKay Street immediately rallied to sponsor the housing and education of 16 high-school students for five years, which end in December. **The English Catholic Teachers Association of Ottawa funded construction of the Pitseng Centre in 2008, a community centre that includes a library being used by hundreds of people every week.** A second centre, to open in January, will provide a home for Help Lesotho's leadership program and its support services for orphans and grannies.

Help Lesotho has twinned 15 schools with Canadian counterparts from coast to coast and arranged the sponsorship of 250 orphans and vulnerable children by individuals and families in Canada and the United States. It pays the school fees of another 150 children, and has put 16,000 youths through gender-education training in an effort to improve the cultural value placed on women. It has also fixed the leaky thatched roofs on the dwellings of countless grandmothers.

"In the five years we've been going, we've raised \$3.6 million, which is great, but it's what we've done with it that we're really proud of," says Herbert. "Nine thousand people are benefitting from our programs now.

"We don't spend any money on promotion or ads or anything like that," says Herbert. "Help Lesotho is a remarkable story of how many people want to help a country they've never heard of, people they'll never see."

Running the organization is now Herbert's full-time job, and she has a small staff and countless volunteers providing administrative and program support here and in Lesotho.

Throwing this anniversary dinner is Herbert's way of thanking the organization's supporters, in particular several volunteers who have been crucial to its success: Sandra and Paul Hellyer, Kathleen Lauder, Joanne Beveridge and Campbell Osler.

"To stop for a minute and take this time to truly tell people how valuable their donations and support are is just such a wonderful thing," says Herbert. "A lot of people are very cynical about what can be done in Africa. By working together, building wonderful relationships with our partners, we can do a lot."

King Letsie III did his research before making this journey, reading Help Lesotho's annual report and touring its projects with Herbert earlier this year.

"We are accepted as partners and not heroes," says Herbert. "The reason we're there is so that those grannies and orphans won't feel alone. They were so forgotten and now thousands of people know they're cared for."

