

## Reality in Lesotho

As a documentary photographer and writer my role is to witness, document and inform in order to bring about social change through individual, collective or governmental action. Since April 2006 I have been documenting the situation in Lesotho and how the issues there are affecting people on the ground.

Popularly known as 'The Kingdom in the sky', Lesotho's mountainous beauty masks the underlying daily grief that people are dealing with as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In 2006 the population of Lesotho was 2.2 million; it now stands at 1.8 million.

and asthma among many other preventable diseases

In the three years of travelling back and forth I have made many friends and now I am seeing them die. The statistics have a very real meaning for me. In this article I would like to bring to your attention a typical week in Lesotho and the reality for Basotho.

Driving through Ballyvourney in south west Cork I get a text from Ntate Mankoe, Project Coordinator, Twinning the Kingdoms, Lesotho, it reads; 'Ntate Phiri has passed away, the funeral is on 13.6.09.' I'm stunned and text back, 'Do you mean my friend Ntate Joseph Phiri?' The resulting conversation confirms the fact that Joseph was admitted to Leribe

Years ago Joseph used to work in the mines in South Africa; unlike most men he was not retrenched, but suffered a stab wound, and as a result, over time gradually lost the use of his legs. When I first met Ntate Phiri in the village of Ha Nyenye he was depressed; sitting in his kitchen he used to lift himself from one chair to another to get around the house. He was unable to access the outside toilet and had to use a bucket in the house and found it demeaning. With help from his friend Ntate Mankoe, he got a wheelchair but was still unable to get outside and into his garden. An Irish builder, Brian O'Donovan from Tralee, made his home wheelchair friendly and life took off for Ntate Joseph. He attended a two week course last July for people with disabilities facilitated by Twinning the Kingdoms, and as a result became a founder member of Reikamohetse, a disability support group, who are now providing services to children and people with disabilities in Maputsoe.

Joseph was a strong man; a spiritual man, who was inspired by Mandela and looked with hope to the new U.S. President Barack Obama, to commit more resources to developing countries such as Lesotho. Ntate Phiri was a community leader who looked forward to making a difference. His house was always the first stop for volunteers from Ireland so that they could get a



Ntate Joseph Phiri

The average life expectancy is thirty four years of age. There are over 400,000 orphaned and vulnerable children struggling to survive without parents. People die from AIDS, diabetes, tuberculosis, high blood pressure

hospital. His wife travelled to the hospital the next morning to hear that her husband died in the night; his condition, high blood pressure and asthma; in Ireland Joseph would have had access to medicines to control both conditions and would still be alive today.

lesson in Sesotho and be confident to greet people with courtesy. I will miss Ntate Joseph very much. His funeral could not take place immediately; he, like most people in his village, paid money into a burial society so that his funeral expenses could be covered.

There have been so many funerals over the past few weeks that the society will not have the funds to bury him until later this month.

Ntate Mankoe was stopped along the main Maputsoe road by a local policeman who had heard of the work that Twinning the Kingdoms, the Irish NGO, is engaged in. He was worried about a young boy; this boy was breaking into houses to steal food. When Ntate Mankoe visited the boy's home it became clear that his mother was dying and the boy was stealing food to provide for her. The landlady of their one roomed home was worried they would not be able to pay the rent; she herself is elderly, very sick and needs the rent to buy food and medicine.

Since that day this thirteen year old boy has seen his mother die; her body lay in the house

for two days. After his absence from school he was too frightened to go back. His father is reluctant to take on the responsibility for him. This boy deserves an equal chance.

Another text arrives; 'In our feeding programme 'M'e Mansoti has passed away.' In the villages, in small homes, people are lying on their beds; there is no food in these homes and this means that people cannot take essential medicines. Local caregivers visit the sick but they too are hungry, it is winter right now and people are starving. Twinning the Kingdoms is providing food once a month for families who are sick and desperate; a local cooperative is building keyhole gardens outside each home so that there will be easy access to fresh vegetables. The reality is that sometimes the food parcels are just too late; for some it is a lifeline and since December

they are now able to do their own gardening and some have got back to work which will enable them the dignity of providing for their families.

A final text for the week from Ntate Isaac, Principal of Morate English Medium High School in Kolonyama; 'Sorry to tell you that Tefo's father has passed away.' Tefo is 15 years old, a serious student whose goal is to study medicine. Every week in Morate seven parents pass away. In the words of Montseng Motseki, Tefo's school friend and poet, life for her and her friends is, 'Filled with aims, filled with pain, filled with fear, filled with dreams.'

**If you would like more information about  
Lesotho and the work being done there, please contact:  
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