

## PROJECT HELP LESOTHO

Silence and a hurried sadness fall on this village as infinite fat flakes. I walk, accompanied by several students, up the corn field-covered slope that separates the school where I work from the mud-walled house where I stay. The village is gradually cut off by a descending wall of grey-white wetness from the company of nearby hills topped with clusters of thatch houses. Snow in this poverty evokes something different from the comforting, tingling numbness brought on by snow in Canada. For my escort, it means long, cold walks home to distant villages without enough clothes; for the many who subsist on the fields they tend it means a meagre harvest; for all those who sleep in huts warmed only by fire it means freezing nights and sick mornings. It is June 2006, and an unusually cold winter is approaching for those who live on the roof of Africa, in the mountain nation of Lesotho.

Lesotho has the dubious distinction of having the highest HIV prevalence rate of the 50 Least Developed Countries in the world.<sup>1</sup> Per capita income is two dollars per day.<sup>2</sup> One out of every three Basotho (the people of Lesotho) is HIV positive.<sup>3</sup> It is hard to argue with the fact that Lesotho is in dire straits. So I, a 21 year-old with a year of university under my belt and searching for some clarity of purpose in my life, find myself working as a volunteer affiliated with a small Canadian charity named Project Help Lesotho as part of a seven-month stint in Africa.

Having reached my house, I lend my toque, my jacket and a sweater to a few students who are particularly ill-equipped for the weather. I will not need the clothes for the night, and they still have a lengthy trudge ahead of them. One would think that in a place like Lesotho, opportunities to lend a helping hand like this one would be in abundance. But my experiences in Africa have led me to a more nuanced conclusion about the power and dangers of young people volunteering overseas.

I became quick friends with Thabo, a Grade 11 student at the school where I worked, when we discovered a shared love for jogging not long after my arrival in Lesotho. He found great pleasure in how quickly I lost my breath in the thin mountain air, so our runs (and breaks) provided ample time to make each others' acquaintance. Thabo had lost both parents (likely to AIDS) and was attending school on a rare needs-based scholarship away from his extended family (who appeared indifferent to his existence). It is obvious he is motivated by this scholastic opportunity: he works hard and does well. He is the sort of inspirational kid who greets you daily with a smile, no matter the circumstances. But he is obviously alone, and later I discover from another friend that his living stipend barely covers his food and he often eats only once a day. When I contemplated the injustice, a hard working kid, hungry and relatively alone, it seemed only natural to invite him to come have dinner with me regularly. It is a good thing I did not.

Fortuitously, I found myself in a conversation with a teacher about the importance of jealousy in organizing community interactions. I learned that in Lesotho, where avenues to achievement are so few that one person's success often means another's failure, people harbour an acute sense of who deserves what, and sanction those who surpass their prescribed position. Someone else's success, especially if they are less privileged, is implicitly understood as an offence: it means that my or my relatives' failure is not due purely to the unfavourable conditions all community members face, but to some degree is due to a personal failing. Sanctions against the less privileged who show signs of abnormal success include gossip that questions their moral standing, ridicule, the withdrawal of social supports and ostracism. Thabo was doubly vulnerable: not only was he underprivileged and therefore expected to perform poorly, but he was likely orphaned by a highly stigmatized disease, and thus his moral standing was liable to be questioned. To have a chance at moving past high school, Thabo had to keep a low profile, drawing little attention to his successes and his family situation, so that he could maintain what informal support he had and avoid the community's sanctions.

If I had invited Thabo to join me for dinner daily, it would have been rude, and thus difficult, for him to refuse – especially since I was working for the school and therefore deserving of respect. But as the one foreign visitor in the village, I was highly visible, and people would have noticed Thabo's frequent visits. Since it would appear Thabo was gaining disproportionate benefit from my presence compared to other students, people would come to question Thabo's motives in befriending me. Under closer scrutiny, Thabo's relative success in school would likely be interpreted as the product of his positioning himself to unfairly monopolize aid directed towards the community as a whole. His relationship with me would appear to be only the most obvious manifestation, but his deservingness of other aid, such as his scholarship, might come under question by the community. In such a situation, the village would likely sanction what they saw as a breach of community norms and remove the informal supports provided to Thabo, further marginalizing him. My apparently straightforward short term solution would likely have circumscribed Thabo's long term opportunities.

These sorts of situations were common, and I cannot say I always navigated their intricacies successfully. I understood, even before departing, that my lack of language skills, cultural capital and technical knowledge limited my ability to make a significant positive impact, and that my primary goal should be to learn first and then act if possible. However, the sheer magnitude of need often overwhelmed these rational buffers to rash action. When arriving face-to-face with tragedy, we are driven by an all-powerful need to assuage our guilt with visible deeds. We desire to see the positive impacts of our presence, as if to separate ourselves from the processes that have created the injustice, to declare our allegiances to the marginal once and for all. I can only hope that my positive impact outweigh my blunders.

It is this drive towards rash action that makes young volunteers overseas a dangerous commodity. That is not to say we should throw up our hands and keep our youth sheltered in their comfortable western existence. Young people who are cautious, observant, and conceptualize their time overseas as part of a larger process should be encouraged and supported to go abroad. If they see their time overseas as providing them with resources to engage in activism and advocacy at home, where their influence is much greater, as well as providing them with the impetus to question the impacts of their chosen direction in life, they will likely benefit from the communities they visit in the long term. These young people will act as ambassadors, using their experiences and passion to shake people in Canada from their torpor, forcing them to see those who often suffer in obscurity. It is only through such changes that long term solutions to poverty and HIV can truly come about.

What is required for those who facilitate these excursions is to take extreme caution. Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) like Canada World Youth and Youth Challenge International face incentives that push them to address these concerns only marginally. Organizations are competing over young people willing to pay significant fees to participate in such projects, fees that pay staff salaries and allow an organization to grow. Though I do not question the honourable intentions of such NGO staff (many of whom I count as my friends), it appears the structure of today's system can skew these virtuous objectives. Projects are expanded before they are ready to accommodate more volunteers. Young people are accepted into these programs with the hope that they will achieve the above mentioned mentality while on project, rather than assuring that they hold it already. Advertisement competes for interested customers by playing into the public's perception that good intentions and hard work are enough to have a positive impact while overseas, rather than striving to debunk this myth. The result is, on occasion, a young volunteer who does not realize that the repercussions of their actions will be shouldered by the community long after the volunteer returns to their home. They fail to realize that Thabo's situation, though not ideal, is all he has. He cannot walk away from my decisions as I inevitably will.

I watch the snow flakes catch and melt on my black fleece jacket as the few students move away from my house and begin the long walk toward their homes. The storm steadily obscures their silhouettes, and soon they are invisible. Metaphorically, it is this that NGOs must strive to prevent: a blindness to the fact that life in these communities goes on long after it becomes invisible to volunteers. The frigid temperatures are not expected, and these students happen to be the ones I was tutoring after school. Closing the door, I feel confident my actions have been justified, and turn to make myself a cup of tea. Tomorrow, they will bring the clothes back to me, and I will remember to let Thabo know, discreetly, how highly I regard him and that I am here to help if he so requires.

*Alex Way attends the University of Toronto where he specializes in Peace and Conflict Studies. He is a graduate of Pearson United World College of the Pacific. In 2004-05, he acted as a Canadian Youth Representative to Environment Canada and the United Nations Environment Program. He has worked in Tanzania, Uganda and Lesotho, collaborating with local youth on HIV/AIDS initiatives on both prevention and care for those affected.*

Footnotes:

1. UNCTAD. "The Least Developed Countries Report, 2006".  
<[http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ldc2006p1ch2\\_en.pdf](http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ldc2006p1ch2_en.pdf)>.
2. UNCTAD "Lesotho"  
<[http://www.unctad.org/sections/ldc\\_dir/docs/ldcmisc20053\\_les\\_en.pdf](http://www.unctad.org/sections/ldc_dir/docs/ldcmisc20053_les_en.pdf)>.
3. UNCTAD. "The Least Developed Countries Report, 2006".  
<[http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ldc2006p1ch2\\_en.pdf](http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ldc2006p1ch2_en.pdf)>