

# QHOLAQHOE MOUNTAIN CONNECTIONS



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November 2021

## News from Qholaqhoe, Lesotho

by Lynn Minderman

### *Return to Qholaqhoe* October 5-19, 2021

The last QMC trip to Qholaqhoe ended abruptly in March 2019 when Roger and Lin left early and quickly as the pandemic set in. My last visit had been one year earlier, March 2018, together with Roger and Lin. So, this was a difficult trip from the outset, given our absence and therefore, our ignorance of what was happening on the ground in Lesotho. Then, my trip, fully scheduled for August 2021, was cancelled at the last moment due to unrest in South Africa and local rise of COVID cases in SA and Lesotho. So, from the outset, this was a difficult trip because, for the first time in 14 years, I was going alone and because of the urgency of the work. I wanted to see the high school and to have conversations with school administrators to discuss the future of our relationships to include expansion of the recruitment of college scholarship applicants. I thought it essential to complete the recruitment and hiring of a local QMC representative to push our work forward as well as ease the burden on Joseph, QHS Deputy Principal, and the teachers who were doing the work in our absence. And I felt it important that I renew my relationship with representatives of the greater Qholaqhoe community to ensure they were in support of our work moving forward.

I was also focused on re-connecting after two years absence with the seven students studying at the National University of Lesotho supported by QMC scholarships. In addition, re-evaluation of the Lesotho Agriculture College to qualify for QMC College Program students was imperative in order for a new student, Sejhana, to receive a QMC college scholarship to study there. I knew it was critical to speak directly with representatives of the greater Qholaqhoe community about both our scholarship programs.

Moreover, we always want real time information for our donors and sponsors included in the newsletter and fundraising outreach. For me and for QMC, the trip was vital. I'm happy that I went and hopeful that a trip alone is not necessary again.



### *Tse'peng Steps Up*

It is essential that QMC board members travel to Lesotho to understand first-hand the culture, the community and the nature of our work there. By virtue of our time in Qholaqhoe, we have been able to plan and set in motion our programs sufficiently to proceed with local direction until the next annual visit. However, two years absence revealed an urgent need for constant representation on the ground in Qholaqhoe. In March, 2021, the board agreed that I would identify a local representative capable of carrying out the increasing work load in our

absence, thus providing a focus on our scholarship programs while removing much of the burden from Joseph and teachers.

I spoke with Joseph about Tse'pang Matli, a QMC scholarship student both at QHS and NUL, who had had been voluntarily assisting Joseph with the college program by coordinating travel, helping resolve students' problems and generally keeping 'the QMC family' of NUL students together. Joseph was highly enthusiastic about her work and the about the possibility of further assistance from her.

Because I was a bit nervous about my safety traveling alone in Lesotho, I asked Tse'peng to accompany me every day as well as put in place plans and schedules for my work before I arrived. She accepted instantly and went to work on every task I sent her. For the entire time I was in Lesotho, she was with me, on the road and on the goat trails, interpreting for me at frequent police checkpoints, with families she had scheduled for visits, in large community meetings. Moreover, I felt safe with this strong, intelligent young Basotho woman guiding me around her country. I assigned her planning work, immediate tasks, speaking roles at important meetings. I observed strong positive responses everyone had to her.

It was evident from the outset that she far exceeded what I expected. She offered her suggestions, ideas and produced results with a fun-loving spirit. Tse'pang knows everyone and her training as a social worker and counselor is evident in how she talks and connects with students, villagers, community leaders. She is a natural fit for QMC. Having worked with her for more than a week and observing her skills and enthusiasm, I offered her a one-year position as QMC Community Representative.



## ***Straight forward Conversations with Qholaqhoe School Leaders***

I had several discussions with Mme Mosaase, Principal, and Joseph Lengala, Deputy Principal, about the present status of QHS. For our first conversation, I invited them both to join me for dinner in Clarens, South Africa, on my first evening; they were so kind to travel there to welcome me and talk with me. In fact, we lost track of time during our conversation, they left the restaurant later than expected, found the SA/Lesotho border closed, so returned to Clarens to spend the night with me.

More talk. I started our conversations by telling them that I wanted them to understand that QMC is concerned about the academic performance of students at the school. I explained that I came alone when no other board members were able to join me because it is important that I understand that our work to raise funds for students to attend QHS, and that are donors' generosity, was in fact helping students.

I let them know that after 14 years we have become concerned about the academic performance of students, declining student scores on national exams, deteriorating physical condition of school campus and classrooms and failure to maintain QMC funded water and sanitary latrine projects. I noted that in 2021, QMC had raised sufficient funds to support an additional 4 students at university, yet there was only a single qualified applicant from QHS.

I explained given that lack of qualified or interested QHS applicants for the College Scholarship Program, QMC's thinking is to expand the scholarship eligibility to students living in Qholaqhoe villages who do not attend QHS, a current requirement. Joseph did not disagree, did not make excuses and offered no remedies. He was clearly saddened when I suggested that QMC may have to consider withdrawing support from the high school. He said "I always assumed QMC and QHS are together."

## And, Community Representatives

At my request, Joseph arranged for us (Tse'pang, Joseph, Mamare, who did not attend, and me) to attend a meeting of the Qholaqhoe area Board of Councilors. Joseph explained that many Councilors are in the position as they are the oldest and wisest in their village, many are young and eager and want changes, and some just want the position.

At the end of the business meeting, we were invited to speak to the group. Joseph spoke for QMC, announcing the expansion of the College Scholarship Program eligibility to students from Qholaqhoe who do not attend QHS. Then he introduced Tse'pang, explaining her role as QMC Community Representative. Tse'pang, speaking Sesotho, explained the expanded college scholarship eligibility and unchanged application process now to be open to graduates of other schools. There was an expressed appreciation among the attendees.

I spoke directly and honestly to the group, made up of villagers I have known for years, about the reasons for the expansion of the College Scholarship Program. I could not have been clearer about our concerns with the high school and my disappointment in its current condition given the long affiliation between QMC and QHS. From the questions and comments following our presentations, I am sure the councilors understand the current circumstance.



## *Dream Deferred, Dream Delivered*

When QMC initiated the College Scholarship Program in 2017, it included a requirement that any college a scholarship applicant wished to attend would be visited and approved by a QMC board member before the scholarship could be approved. We would look into the physical condition of the campus, the quality of the academic program and evidence of financial stability. At the time, there was a student interested in attending the Lesotho Agriculture College so I visited the campus. I found the College did not meet our basic standards and thus had to deny the scholarship, a very difficult thing to do. Since that time, there have been no students interested in the Agriculture College.

Then, along came Sejohana Sejohana, a 4-year QMC/QHS scholarship student who maintained a strong and close relationship with his QMC sponsor throughout his entire high school career. Because of his interest in agriculture and improving the agricultural practices in his country, and believing there was a scholarship available to him, Sejohana applied to and was accepted into the LAC. He enrolled, began his studies and found immediate success. Joseph contacted the College to assure it that Sejohana would have his scholarship as soon as I made my trip to Lesotho, at that time scheduled for August 2021. When I had to cancel that trip due to a COVID outbreak, the College withdrew its support for Sejohana and directed him to leave campus and the research work he had started. He was crushed.

I found him on the street in Butha Buthe, the nearest camptown, just where Tse'pang told me he would be, and told him I was going to visit his home, gather the required approvals and signatures, then take him back to LAC, make a new inspection and secure his scholarship.

This short conversation produced, without doubt, the emotional high of my trip. As we talked, I sat on a cement block; Sejohana squatted on a tree root and Tse'pang stood under a tree watching us. When I told Sejohana that we were taking him back to LAC, that I would conduct another visit to verify the quality of campus, program and financial vitality and that I fully expected that he would then re-enroll with a full scholarship, he stood up, turned away from me, crying, then turned back to hug me until I fell off my cement block while yelling "My mask! My mask!" Then he and Tse'pang hugged, danced, laughed and screamed.

Meanwhile, I was trying to figure out how to get back across the border on time. Sejhana walked home to tell his grandmother the news.

The next day, Tse'pang and I headed out to Sejhana's village and home. What a long short trip it was. We drove until the trail ended, then set off on foot for the last 3 kilometers. Tse'pang was lively, unfazed and encouraging, assuring me that it was not much further according to her Basotho calculation of distance. She was wrong. It was far, over rugged creek beds, mountain goat trail and loose stone to the remote, isolated, quiet village that is Sejhana's home. His grandmother, proud of and thrilled for her grandson, obviously gave her approval; we secured all the necessary signatures to meet our scholarship requirements and started back along the rugged path. Sejhana came along, a good thing in that he was able to protect me from the racist dogs along the way which apparently wanted to rid the world of an old white lady.

Upon return to LAC, I found a renovated, energized campus, well maintained and very active. Sejhana proudly showed his research fields and described his work, demonstrating his knowledge and desire to return to his interrupted work. I met financial officials in the Bursar's office and, well satisfied with what I had observed, finalized Sejhana's registration and arranged a payment plan by which QMC will pay his tuition.



Sejhana: "I can't believe it."



Sejhana signs QMC College Scholarship Agreement.

Sejhana enters Lesotho Agriculture College with Joseph & Tse'pang



## *'QMC Family' at National University of Lesotho*



Left to Right: Paolosi Tema (BA Political Science/Public Administration); Mapula Talime (BA Social Work); Sejhana Sejhana (Agriculture Engineering); Kananelo Bohome(BA Social Work); Tse'pang Matli )BA Social Work/Counseling) (QMC Community Representative); Itumeleng Lengala (MA Law); Moeling Ts'oaenyan(BA Humanities); Karabo Tjoobe( MA Law); Home Mota (BA Social Work).

Since the first students from Qholaqhoe won scholarships to the National University of Lesotho, they have been well supported through the efforts of QMC. Joseph and his wife Selena have travelled regularly to campus to check on our students, help them through difficulties, distribute allowances, a task that Tse'peng will take over now. QMC board members have made personal contact with key officials in the bursar's office. We have developed a reputation at the University for paying our bills on time and for paying attention to our students. Joseph has a relationship with the food service manager and the bank clerk on campus who helps our students receive their allowances.

In every way, the University has treated the QMC students well. For instance, as there is limited housing available on campus it is offered to first year students only. Yet, because our students are from an extremely rural area, unfamiliar with the city and unable to afford private housing, they are allowed to remain in campus housing. They are secure, have plenty of food and because of their residence on campus have ready access to all the academic and social resources offered.

I missed personal contact with these outstanding young men and women over the two-year COVID absence, only made worse by trip cancellation and delay in August. I was anxious to meet with them, know their stories of hard work, celebrate success, encourage them with assurances of our interest and support. Joseph, Tse'pang

and I hosted all 8 of our students for a dinner at Lancers Inn in Maseru. It was an evening of laughter, celebration, fellowship, and a welcome for Sejhana, the newest member of the 'QMC family.' I was thrilled to see them all act just as you might expect young college students. There were pictures, stories, dancing to no music, a good time. Then they all caught a taxi to return to their dorms before dark.

The next day on the NUL campus, Joseph, Tse'pang and I had a private conversation with each of the seven NUL students. Tse'pang spoke with them about their responsibilities to QMC and its donors, the importance of keeping donors informed about their progress at college. Joseph wanted to know how each student was doing with the logistics of college life, their progress toward graduation, class registration, personal financial management, general well-being on campus. I spoke with each student about how their lives were progressing, their families, and their vision of the life ahead of them. They were all tired of on-line learning along with the myriad of other COVID related disruptions, yet were satisfied they had learned to adapt and persist.



## *Not To Be Denied*

One student in particular, Paolosi, spoke at length about his quest for an education and the challenges he had overcome to get to university. Paolosi is 26 years old, grew up in extreme poverty, started at QHS in 2012 without enough funding to pay the tuition. He told me that he went to QHS anyway, attended classes and learned as much as he could until he was told to leave. He waited awhile, then returned to class at QHS until in 2013 when he left again for 2 years. In 2015, he returned on a government scholarship for 'vulnerable' children. By then, he was older than all the other students at QHS and faced substantial peer pressure/bullying to leave because he didn't 'belong'.

He had only one friend, who didn't do well in school, thus had to master learning by himself, but as Paolosi told me *"I had a passion for education. I've always done well in school, so knew I would do what was right for me."* Some time ago, he had entered an essay contest sponsored by United Nations Lesotho, submitting an essay title *"What would my ideal world look like in the next 25 years to come"*.

He was one of 10 winners and was invited to a dinner in the capital Maseru with UN Lesotho staff and the Lesotho ambassador. *"I met young visionary leaders who were among the top 10 winners and together we agreed to form a cooperative group that now meets once a month at NUL."* The goal of the group is to study crops, livestock, poultry, vegetables and see if we can have employment and earn a living when we graduate".

Now he is studying political science and public administration, and though older than the others in the QMC group, he is a part of the 'family' and is doing well.



Paolosi Tema

A young man to watch and support

## *Forward*

It was an exhausting and anxious trip. Just getting there was hard. Then, I was nervous about the 5-hour drives from Tambo Airport in Johannesburg to Clarens, SA and back; I was nervous throughout the solitary drives through alien land. I was anxious about COVID; I never took my mask off; neither do the Basotho people. I was exhausted by long treks to the most remote villages; some things I saw displeased and worried me.

It was, however, an exhilarating and joyful voyage. I am satisfied that my long and meaningful relationship with Joseph (I love that man!) is renewed in an open and honest way. We have a gem in Tse'peng supporting students and communities in ways we never can. The Qholaqhoe community is reconnected with us and, I must believe, trusts us for what we do as well as for our honesty and candor. I am thrilled with the college students' resiliency, optimism, confidence and commitment. I look forward to telling you more about each of them as they progress toward the next. I look forward to my next trip.

And, finally, I worry, all of us on the Board worry, about our longevity. I will do this as long as I can; we all will. This trip told me that. I love the people, I love the time with them, I love what they are accomplishing with just the little support and encouragement we give them. So, the important work of this Board along with all that you have just read, to extend this work far into the future, is to find and interest new companions to move us ahead. Read on – Roger offers ways you can learn more and join us.

On behalf of the students and families of Qholaqhoe, of all of us with Qholaqhoe Mountain Connections, thank you.



### *Qholaqhoe Mountain Connections is...*

...at a crossroads. Since its founding 13 years ago by Lynn Minderman, QMC has sought to benefit the children of Qholaqhoe, a rural mountainous area of Lesotho where she served as a Peace Corps volunteer. What started as a small family-based non-profit focused on the education of children at Qholaqhoe High School, over the years QMC has grown to include new sponsors, new board members and an expanded mission that now includes the support of deserving students at the college level. We are proud of our success, but recognize the need to continually look to the future.

To that end, we have scheduled a strategic planning session for March of next year. Our goal is to review and refine our mission. To that end we will assess our current commitments and successes and envision a future organization that is exciting, sustainable, and forward thinking.

Our board has carried the load for these many years, but we recognize our own limitations. To support our work on the ground in Lesotho, we recently hired one of our QHS and college graduates to help manage the day-to-day tasks that keep our programs functioning. This has already proven to be extremely beneficial. However, as we look to the future, we also recognize the need for help on the U.S. side of our organization. That's where you come in.

We would love to hear from you. If you are reading this newsletter, it is likely that you have already contributed funds to support our mission. Thank you! Given that commitment, perhaps you would welcome the opportunity to contribute in some other capacity. We are looking for people who have the time and energy to support what we do--people with educational, financial, fund-raising, or other interests and expertise; people perhaps willing and able to travel.

If we have piqued your interest and you or someone you know might be interested in supporting QMC in some capacity, please let us know. Please email board member Roger Gorham ([rgorham47@gmail.com](mailto:rgorham47@gmail.com)) with a short description of your background and area of interest. He will pass this information on to the QMC board prior to our strategic planning session in March. Thanks so much for your consideration!

## *Scholarship Student/QMC Sponsor Letters for 2022*

Some QMC sponsors have recently received their final 2021 scholarship student letter. As we have done in the past you can email me your letter to your student at [lin.gorham@gmail.com](mailto:lin.gorham@gmail.com) or send it by regular mail to PO Box 28, Rainbow Lake NY 12976. For the 2022 school year, you will receive three letters from your student. Please make sure your letters reach me no later than December 30.

Thank you, Linda Gorham.

Please visit our website, [www.qmconnect.org](http://www.qmconnect.org) for updates and photos and videos of our students



### *How to Donate*

If you would like to support the work of QMC and bring hope and promise to our students please use the DONATE button at the top of our website: [\*\*www.qmconnect.org\*\*](http://www.qmconnect.org). *It is easy, it is fast.*

*or*

Our 2022 donation form is attached at the end of the newsletter. Simply complete and return with your check.

*Thank you!*



**2022 Donation Form**

Qholaqhoe High School Programs \$ \_\_\_\_\_

- QHS Scholarship Fund: new and returning sponsors  
\$250 provides one year's tuition and testing fees per student.

Qholaqhoe Community College Scholarship Program \$ \_\_\_\_\_

- Yearly tuition at National University of Lesotho \$4,000
- Misc. personal expenses for one student per year \$100
- Textbooks for one semester \$150
- Residence fees for one semester \$350
- Food for one semester \$350
- Laptop, per student \$400

Donation to the General Fund (non-restricted use) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Total** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

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Please make checks payable to Qholaqhoe Mountain Connections.  
P.O. Box 405, Honeoye Falls, NY 14472.  
(A registered 501c3 non-profit organization. A tax receipt will be sent.)

**You may also donate on-line via our website: [www.qmconnect.org](http://www.qmconnect.org)**

***Thank you!***