

'Breaking the Barriers'

Documentary Photography Exhibition & Public Presentation Series

In September 2007 I visited Lesotho to work with Adam Musgrave, a Development Worker with Skillshare International, who facilitated the umbrella group Lesotho National Association of People with Disabilities. Adam and his counterparts introduced me to ten people with disabilities so that I could document the challenges that they face on a daily basis. I learned that the issues that Basotho are facing today; lack of access to education, training, employment, transport,

essential services and discrimination were the same issues that people with disabilities in Ireland have been fighting to ensure that they have equal rights.

The resulting exhibition, 'Breaking the Barriers', was launched by Queen Seeiso in the Maseru State Library on International Day of Persons with Disabilities, December the 3rd 2007. The photographs have been exhibited in the Royal Palace in conjunction with the Red Cross and the exhibition has been touring Lesotho since that date.

The exhibition was launched in Ireland on September the 24th, 2009 in University College Cork by Brian Crowley MEP. The exhibition will tour universities and colleges in Ireland where it is hoped that it will highlight issues, raise awareness, create links between disability groups in Ireland and Lesotho and encourage collective and personal action from the people who view the photographs.

'Breaking the Barriers' explores the lives of ten people who are living with disabilities. The exhibition illustrates the challenges which face thousands of disabled people in the country of Lesotho. The deaf, physically disabled, visually impaired and intellectually disabled should enjoy the same human rights as every other Mosotho. Yet all too often they are marginalised from society, and are denied access to public buildings and transport, education, employment and social services.

The exhibition also portrays the determination and dignity of people with disabilities. Many have broken the negative stereotypes given to them by society. They have overcome the numerous challenges against them and are able to successfully work, earn a living and enjoy a family life. Some have gone on to campaign for the rights of the disabled.

This is their story.

Lebohang is seventeen years old and has cerebral palsy, a condition which affects both his physical and mental state. He has not been able to go to school, and requires constant care at home. His disability has resulted in



behavioural problems and Lebohng has broken most of the furniture in the house. His family have not received any support from the government to help care for Lebohng. Lebohng's grandmother, Maliako Hababa, is 70 years old. She used to be self-employed, but since Lebohng's birth she has stopped working in order to care for him, and is struggling to cope financially. Maliako has tried to access support from the government but has had little success. 'What we hate is that they did not see him as a person, only the disability. The government says that it is helping the disadvantaged but it is just not happening.' Maliako feels that if the government provided a respite service and occasional financial support, things would change for the better. But she is worried about Lebohng's future; holding back tears she says, 'what will happen when I die.'

Khonthi is 49 years old and used to work in the mines as a winch driver. In 1984, tragedy struck when Khonthi was crushed beneath falling rocks, causing terrible damage to his spine and confining him to a wheelchair. 'It was very difficult to cope with this change. You have to sit down and think very hard, how am I going to support my family.' Despite his impairment, Khonthi is very self-motivated and confident; he has ambitions for his future. He has sought training in leather work and electrical repairs. Yet a major challenge for Khonthi is the lack of physical accessibility in Leribe; he struggles to get into public buildings and use transport because there is no provision for those with wheelchairs.

Mahlomola is ten years old; he is deaf and has severe mental disabilities. Both of his parents have died and he lives with two older brothers who care for him. Mahlomola has never been to school; the government schools refused to accept him and the special schools were either already full or couldn't cope with his multiple disabilities.

Mahlomola's eldest brother, Lehlohonolo, has dropped out of school and found casual work to provide food for the family. 'I would like to see my brother have some schooling...to see a future for him. I would like to go back to school myself and train to become an engineer.' Soon after I met Mahlomola the Special Education Unit at the Ministry of Education managed to find a place for him at a special school in Butha Buthe.

Rethabile works as a herd boy near Semonkong. He was born with a physical disability in his right leg and arm, but still manages to look after his

grandmother's cattle. Both of his parents have died so he is now living with his grandmother who is HIV positive. He would like to receive physiotherapy to help his movement, but there are no such services in Semonkong. Rethabile dreams of owning a horse so that he can attend classes in Semonkong; his village is too far away for him to walk.

Malikonelo is 32 years old and is visually impaired. She attended primary school but couldn't progress to secondary school because of her disability. She was trained in candle making and sewing but doesn't have enough money to start her own business. She is therefore unemployed and has had to move back to her mother's small home with her two children. Malikonelo would love to find a job; she knows employers will see her disability before her skills. She is an active member of the Lesotho National League for Visually Impaired Persons.

Leqele is twelve years old and was born with Down's syndrome. He lives with his family in a small house in Semonkong. The family have not received any financial or social support to help care for Leqele, and he has never seen a social worker. He attends St. Leonard's Primary School in Semonkong but cannot read or write, and has not progressed past Standard 1. Leqele loves to sing and dance and is always willing to perform in front of his friends and family. He is lively and energetic, and plays with his friends all the time. When he is older he would like to buy a car.

Leqele alongside his three brothers and three sisters is cared for by his mother, Matobatsi. She suffers from TB and is now on medication, and her husband died several years ago. Now the family rely on the food and clothing provided by an aid agency once a month. There are no disability or training projects in the area and very little medical care available in Semonkong.

Tholang Raliete is 24 years old and grew up in the district of Mohale's Hoek; he was born profoundly deaf. He attended school but failed class 7 because he couldn't understand his teachers, who didn't cater for his disability. He feels that deaf children should be taught through sign language because, 'it is their own means of communication'. Despite a difficult childhood, Tholang is determined to learn new skills. He has graduated from Itjareng Vocational Training Centre in carpentry, and has recently completed an apprenticeship in carpentry at BEDCO. Tholang Raliete is determined to make the most of his life and help others too. He travelled to Kenya to study the Bible, and his dream is to bring deaf people together

and teach the bible through sign language. Tholang is also an Executive Member of the National Association of the Deaf Lesotho (NADL). 'I would like to help deaf people develop through advocacy by fighting for a better education in school.'

Libuseng lives in Leribe and is physically disabled. When she was growing up she had to deal with very negative attitudes because of her disability: 'some people make negative remarks on the way you walk... it is not like being spoken to as a human being...you feel belittled and despised'. Despite these attitudes, Libuseng has built self-esteem and is now a confident person, who is an active member of the Lesotho National Association of the Physically Disabled. Libuseng has worked at Leribe Craft Centre since 1995, weaving mohair products and specialising in scarves. She feels that employment has changed her life. 'When I was growing up I never dreamed I would be working and making money, it was something very gratifying to me.' Libuseng believes that the disabled need a proper education and a level playing field for getting jobs, so they can earn a living. As someone who relies on crutches, she also wants better access to public buildings and transport.

Mamokete is a teacher at a secondary school in Maseru. She is visually impaired and has had to overcome numerous challenges to continue working. She went to university in 1979 but had to hide her visual impairment in order to enrol. Later in life, she had to challenge the teaching authorities who tried to force her to resign because of her disability. 'Disability does not mean inability. People think that we are not able.' Mamokete continues to teach, and has travelled extensively in Africa representing national and regional organisations for the visually impaired.

Matlekeng Kalake is 32 years old and was born with autism. He attended primary school, but teachers in secondary school refused to give him the extra assistance he needed. He approached the Lesotho Society of Mentally Handicapped Persons who have helped him to accept his disability. He is now a confident young man despite the negative attitudes he has faced from members of his community. 'My parents never treated me differently from my siblings. I think this is where my strength lies and now I am able to meet any challenge I come across.' Matlekeng is passionate about photography and he started training in 1998. He is now a well-known photographer in the town of TY, and is frequently invited to take photographs at social events and is paid for his services. 'People with disabilities have talents but they are not

given the opportunity to explore their talents. I like my work of photography very much, this type of work helps me to meet other people and help them.' Matlekeng recently married his beautiful wife and has a four month old baby.

Conclusion

It is essential to improve accessibility for people with disabilities, so that they have the opportunity to gain a decent education, obtain employment, receive the social services and care they require, and gain access to public buildings and transport. Disabled people's organisations in Lesotho are calling for the government, employers and service providers to reform their policies and practices in order to fully include them in society, and ensure that their human rights are protected.

Disability does not mean inability. This exhibition illustrates just some of the skills which people with disabilities have. It also highlights the negative attitudes which the disabled face; too often we see the disability before the person. People with disabilities must be respected as equal members of society; as people with the same talents, feelings, emotions and dreams as their able-bodied counterparts. Disability is simply part of human diversity.

Twinning the Kingdoms has received funding from the Development Education arm of Irish Aid. The purpose of the funding is to support this 12 venue touring exhibition and a series of public presentations and workshops in schools. The exhibition will have a pack of supporting development education material that will be used as a resource for teachers.

If you would like to display the exhibition in your area please contact: info@eileenoleary.com

