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by eileen o'leary

## *Violet, Primrose, Butterfly...*

In February 2009 I met a young Mosotho girl called Khopotso in the village of Ha Matata, Maputsoe, Lesotho. Khopotso was at home with her grandmother even though it was a school day; she had not been able to start the school year in January because she was sick. This young girl has come to represent in my mind all the children in Lesotho who no longer have parents and who are cared for by aged and ailing grandparents. Khopotso's wish was to get a new uniform and go to school with her friends in the village. As I sat in the kitchen of her home I noticed that the most prominent items were photographs of her late parents and her own school photographs.



In August last year two volunteers working with the Irish NGO, Action Lesotho, formerly known as Twinning the Kingdoms, created a home schooling programme for Khopotso; some days she was not well enough to concentrate on her school books so Zoe Malone and Jo Mammone spent time painting her toe nails and making her laugh. That's what the volunteers achieved they made Khopotso laugh and brought normality into her day. Her life was a roller coaster; HIV was an unwanted guest that swept through her life taking her to clinics and hospitals where her Grandmother sat by her bedside anxiously waiting to take her back home. Her friend Fusi used to visit her in the clinic after school and play games, often she was the only child there among a room full of empty beds and echoing corridors.

When Zoe and Jo went back to London University they left feeling that they had learned an enormous amount from Khopotso; for them the study of Global Development had moved from the theoretical to the stark reality of life in a developing country; statistics now had a meaning and for them their understanding was centered around a teenage girl that they had come to know and love.

Photography has its own blessings and its own pain. Photographs meant a lot to Khopotso. Over the year her laughter and her joy were recorded, it is bitter sweet to review the images. In December Khopotso's dream came true and she met King Letsie III, presented him with Irish chocolates and had her photograph taken, his arm placed tenderly around her shoulder, it was a defining moment.



*Khopotso & Her Granny*

*continued*

The next morning I visited Khopotso and her Granny, they were having a picnic on the kitchen floor celebrating their excitement of the King's visit; neighbours kept calling in wonder to ask how this had occurred, how was it that the King had come to meet her. Khopotso was full of delight; she had worn her best dress, white organdie with a pink ribbon around the waist and a necklace of blue beads. She could not stop smiling as she relived the event. I don't really need that photograph to remember the magic of that morning but I am glad to have it all the same.

Khopotso died in January 2010, it has been hard for all those who cared for her; James Foley from Killorglin who carried

her home on his back from the clinic, Ciara Walsh, from Cahersiveen, who had become her special friend. Ntate Mankoe and Malemo who ensured that the family had food; the village Health Worker who took Khopotso to the clinic every morning in a wheel barrow so that she could receive her injections, Dr Gyasi whose care extended her life, Fusi Tau who brought her yoghurt every morning before school and Saeed Abucari who made her a coffin as the family had no money to bury her.

Ambassador Paddy Fay paid his respects at Khopotso's simple burial in her village; a gesture that was appreciated by Basotho and Irish alike. As I write, Tom Little, stone carver in Inishannon, is creating a

unique memorial for Khopotso; a piece of Valentia slate will mark her grave. Action Lesotho, its volunteers, supporters and friends feel it is important to remember Khopotso and other children who are living with HIV. The NGO feels that each child deserves a 'Khopotso Caregiver' who will call to the house each morning and evening to ensure that the child has food so that they can take their medication. Regular medication will ensure that they can go to school and be with their friends during a normal school day.



If you would like to support this initiative or would like further information about the work of Action Lesotho, please contact Eileen O'Leary:

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