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'Trusty and well-beloved' Lewis surprised with Lesotho's highest honour

By STEPHANIE NOLEN
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JOHANNESBURG -- It was meant to be a brief working trip, a chance to check in on a couple of projects being supported by his foundation. There would be none of the pomp, the protocol, the high-level meetings that marked his previous visits, when he held the post of United Nations special envoy for HIV-AIDS in Africa.

But in Lesotho last Thursday evening, Stephen Lewis received a surprise summons to the palace of the country's ruler, King Letsie III.

And the next afternoon, after donning the best suit he had with him, he found himself in a royal anteroom surrounded by the members of the cabinet, the senate, the diplomatic corps and the judiciary, serenaded by an operatic Basotho choir, and given a rare sort of thank you.

A royal aide known as the Grandmaster announced that "our trusty and well-beloved" Mr. Lewis was to be invested as a Knight Commander of the Most Dignified Order of Moshoeshoe.

Moshoeshoe, pronounced Mo-shway-shway, was a legendary warrior who united his people, fought off both British and Boer occupiers in the mid-1800s, and founded Lesotho. The knighthood is the small mountain nation's highest honour.

During his five-year tenure as the special envoy in Africa, Mr. Lewis made Lesotho a particular focus of his work: It is the second-most infected nation in the world, with one-quarter of adults living with the virus, and desperately poor. The government, which Mr. Lewis calls "one of the best in Africa," was passionately committed to fighting the epidemic, but was receiving virtually no international support in those efforts. Mr. Lewis was determined to change that.

When he took up the envoy role in 2001, there were fewer than 3,000 people with AIDS receiving life-saving anti-retroviral treatment in Lesotho. Today, there are 24,000 people on the drugs and the government is confident it will pass the 30,000 mark by the end of this year.

The citation for his knighthood credited Mr. Lewis with making this possible both by spurring an influx of donor funds, and by persuading international organizations, including *Médecins sans frontières* (Doctors Without Borders), Partners in Health, the Ontario Hospital Association, Columbia University and the William Jefferson Clinton Foundation, to come to Lesotho. His own charitable foundation is supporting efforts in all the major clinics in the country to prevent pregnant women with HIV from passing the virus to their children.

Thus Mr. Lewis found himself summoned on to a low platform by King Letsie. A high-stepping aide handed the King a **blue-and-white sash**, knotted in a stiff bow, which he draped over Mr. Lewis's shoulder, and then an **enormous enamel decoration** reading "For God and Country." The King laboured to attach the quill-sized pin on the back of the award to Mr. Lewis's lapel, and finally whispered, "I'm ruining your suit." To which Mr. Lewis replied, quietly, "Your Majesty, you are. But it's a small price to pay for Lesotho."

Mr. Lewis then spoke briefly, conveying his thanks for the honour and pledging to continue to work "endlessly" in support of Lesotho. The choir burst into song, and Mr. Lewis bravely stepped out to lead the dancing. Delighted cabinet ministers fell in alongside his somewhat stiff-shouldered rendition of traditional Basotho dance.

Traditionally, knights commander are appointed with the tapping of a sword, but the Basotho were forced to do away with that tradition a couple of years ago when they gave the honour to former U.S. president Bill Clinton, whose foundation's AIDS initiative has also made Lesotho a focus. Mr. Clinton's bodyguards were not prepared to have anybody - even a monarch - waving a sword around the former president. So Mr. Lewis had to settle for the lapel-mangling investiture.

In a long political and diplomatic career, Mr. Lewis, 69, has received no shortage of awards (including more than two dozen honorary degrees), but he remarked after the ceremony in Maseru that this one was particularly poignant. "They really seem to think I was of help, and that's extraordinarily touching," he said. "But God, you just hope it's enough to save the place - and you just don't know."

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