

SCHOOL PROJECT GROWS INTO ACCLAIMED WaterPartners International

BY CHRIS PERRY

During a trip to Guatemala in the 1980s, Gary White took a side trip to a slum in Guatemala City.

“I was shocked at what I saw — sewage in the streets and highly contaminated, community water barrels,” says White, who was an undergraduate at the University of Missouri-Rolla at the time.

The experience changed his life—and he has changed the lives of others throughout the world.

In 1993, while earning a master’s degree at UNC’s School of Public Health, White and fellow student Marla Smith-Nilson founded WaterPartners International, a charitable organization dedicated to improving water supply and sanitation conditions of people living in developing countries.

Today, WaterPartners International collaborates with local, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Africa, Asia and Central America to help water-poor communities build cost-effective, sustainable water systems.

Funded primarily by grants and private donations, WaterPartners holds annual *Water*





PHOTO BY HEATHER ARNEY, WATERPARTNERS INTERNATIONAL

for *Life* fundraising dinners in cities across the United States. The dinners, started by White in 1990, laid the foundation for the organization and earned White the support of his Chapel Hill classmates and teachers.

“In Gary’s first year (at Carolina’s School of Public Health), it quickly became apparent that he had tremendous leadership skills,” says Dr. Donald Lauria, professor of environmental sciences and engineering at Carolina and White’s academic adviser. “During one of the school breaks, Gary led a group of graduate students to the capital

An Ethiopian girl (left) pauses for a drink while collecting water from a new hand pump in Tigray, a region in northern Ethiopia bordering Sudan and Eritrea.

Rashana and Maizabeen of Vinayakngar, Hyderabad, India (above), are two beneficiaries of a WaterPartners International project in their community. Here, they demonstrate how they carried water before their community had a water connection.

city of Honduras. He had convinced them to spend their own money for travel costs. When I learned of it, I was enormously impressed.”

White had planned to let Catholic Relief Services determine the students’ activities in the slums of Tegucigalpa. But when Lauria heard about the trip, he suggested the students collect data on the rate people arrived at public water points called standposts.

Lauria, who studies community water supply and sanitation in developing countries, knew that water flowed from these outdoor faucets intermittently and that the users—poor people with no other water source—often had to wait hours for the water to come on. “Sometimes the water would come on in the middle of the night, and people would jump out of bed to go collect it in buckets,” he says.

Lauria recommended the students track the kinds of containers people brought to the standposts, size of the containers, how long

it took to fill them, how many people came for water, and how many waited in line. Students collected these data from early morning to late at night in a part of the city where the urban landscape changes quickly to rural. White later analyzed the data, which formed the basis for his master’s thesis.

White and Smith-Nilson tapped expertise at the School to help guide WaterPartners International. The first advisory board included Lauria and other UNC faculty renowned worldwide for their water expertise, including environmental sciences and engineering professors Drs. Daniel Okun, Francis DiGiano, Dale Whittington, Philip Singer and David Moreau.

“Our role was to challenge Gary, Marla and other students to think about what was unique about their organization compared to other NGOs,” says Lauria.

Other organizations gave communities new water systems—often poorly designed—as gifts, preventing the communities

from becoming self-sufficient. “Many parts of the world are littered with hundreds of thousands of water systems that don’t work,” Lauria says. “What needs to be done is to help local communities become more self-sufficient.”

WaterPartners helps communities improve their own water resources by locating and certifying partner organizations in developing countries—mostly NGOs—that manage water projects with community-member involvement. Partner organizations mobilize the community, organizing local water committees that oversee the construction and ongoing maintenance of water projects. Few organizations—about one in twenty that apply—meet WaterPartners’ high standards for certification.

“One of WaterPartners International’s keys to success is that water supply decisions are driven at the community level, from the bottom up instead of top down,” says Jennifer Platt, a former School of Public Health classmate of White’s, who’s now director of operations for WaterPartners.

Community residents perform much of the labor to implement their water solutions, while WaterPartners provides engineering knowledge and assistance for sound technical designs. The organization provides oversight for each project by monitoring and evaluating the financial and program accounting of its partners, ensuring a more effective use of donor funds.

“The irony for many people in developing countries is that safe water may be close by but inaccessible, forcing them to spend hours each day walking to collect water from contaminated sources,” says White. He recalled a neighborhood in Ethiopia where “women were walking six hours a day to get water—filthy water—when clean water was available a few meters below their feet. They simply lacked the knowledge and capital needed to drill a well and install a hand pump.”

White says that in addition to supplying communities with life-saving, clean water, the organization’s efforts reduce the large amounts of time people—mostly women and girls—spend each day collecting water. “This saved time can be used to produce income or attend school, activities that can



Felipe, Ganuario and Jose, members of the water committee in Gualcea, Honduras, check on the water distribution line that runs from the tank to the community of Gualcea.

improve quality of life and transform entire communities,” he adds.

WaterPartners has experienced tremendous growth in the past two years. “When I started in 2005, we had three full-time staff members; now, we have 20,” says Platt.

Platt, who earned her master’s degree in environmental management and policy in the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, now has two WaterPartners offices outside of the United States—in India and Kenya. Staff members provide front-line monitoring and on-the-ground support for water projects in their part of the world.

In 2002, White received the School’s Harriet Hylton Barr Distinguished Alumnus Award, presented to one outstanding alumnus each year by the UNC School of Public Health Alumni Association.

“Gary has such a gigantic heart,” says Lauria. “It’s hard to find that level of compassion almost any place in the world.”

For more information about WaterPartners International, visit their Web site at www.water.org. Smith-Nilson now leads Water 1st International, an organization she founded in 2005. More information about Water 1st International can be found at www.water1st.org. ■