

A Way with Water:

UNC alum
dedicates career to
helping create water
and sanitation
systems in rural
developing country
communities

Alfonso Zavala's career in water and sanitation development has taken him to rural villages all over the world where he has done what he does best — help people help themselves.

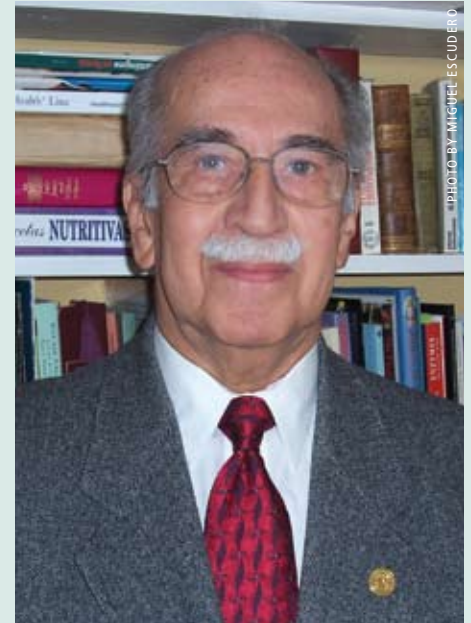
"I was always very interested in providing water supply systems to low-income populations, especially in rural areas where they had nothing," says 79-year-old Zavala, a Peruvian native who earned his master's degree in sanitary engineering at Carolina in 1955 on a fellowship from the International Cooperation Administration—the precursor to the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Zavala's 40-plus year career has included many opportunities to help. After completing his degree, he went on to oversee the development of the first water and sewer system in Sicaya, Peru—a mountainous city of 4,500. Hired by the Peruvian Minister of Health through the Inter-American Co-operative Service of Public Health, Zavala worked with community members to help them develop

a plan to pay 10 percent of total project costs through cash and labor contributions.

"The idea was to organize the community so they could help themselves," says Zavala, who now lives in McLean, Va. "They provided non-specialized labor and money

to show they were interested in having a water system." The project's success became a model for other rural water projects throughout Latin America and led to the creation of Peru's National Rural Water Supply Program, founded by Zavala. Between



Alfonso Zavala

1962 and 1969, through this program, Zavala directed the construction of more than 700 new water supply systems in rural Peruvian communities with populations of 2,000 or less. Each system was built with community participation. Water supply and sanitation administrative boards were formed in each community to oversee the system's operation and maintenance. Tariffs were collected for water so systems would be sustainable.

During this time, Zavala also served as part-time professor at the School of Sanitary Engineering in Lima, Peru's National Uni-

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versity of Engineering. In 1969, he became dean of the School of Sanitary Engineering and a full-time professor, positions he maintained until 1973 when he joined the World Bank as senior sanitary engineer for the Water Supply and Sanitation Division for

Latin America and the Caribbean.

John Kalbermatten, who directed the division at that time, remembers Zavala as being particularly good in relationships with World Bank borrowers.

“He was a splendid negotiator,” Kalbermatten says. “He could sit down with people at any level of the hierarchy and explain his case—explain why projects were formulated the way they were and why some things were necessary to lead to success.

“It’s always a difficult thing to convince developing country officials that water sanitation systems have to be paid for by the people who will be the beneficiaries, even though they may not have much money to make a payment,” Kalbermatten says. “Any system that’s not sustainable by the people who will use it, will eventually fail. This is a concept that is sometimes hard for government officials to accept. You have to make a real good case and have to have the personality to find compromises.”

In 1976, Zavala was promoted to chief of the Water Supply and Sanitation Division for Latin America and the Caribbean. Under

his direction, the program averaged five new water supply and sanitation projects annually and had an active portfolio of more than 30 projects under construction in the region at any given time.

In 1981, Zavala’s successful leadership led him to be tapped once again for a position of responsibility—this time by Peruvian President Fernando Belaúnde. His new job? Reorganize Peru’s water and sanitation system. Under his direction, Peru’s National Water Supply and Sanitation Corporation (SENAPA) was established, with Zavala as the organization’s first chairman of the board and chief executive officer.

“The company was self-sustaining and financially independent,” explains Zavala. “Each person paid for water supply in their community.”

Zavala returned to the World Bank in 1983 and ultimately became adviser to water supply and sanitation at the Bank’s Central Projects Office. In this position, he supervised water and sanitation projects funded by the Bank throughout the world. He retired from the World Bank in 1991 but has

continued working as a consultant and adviser on water supply and sanitation-related issues, primarily in Latin America.

“I loved what I did as a professional,” Zavala says. “I have really enjoyed helping people have good water supply and sanitation systems that can improve their health and wellbeing. It has been a privilege and a source of tremendous satisfaction to have acquired the knowledge and foundation for my career at the UNC School of Public Health, which in turn gave me the ability to help change so many people’s lives in Peru and other developing countries around the world.” ■

— BY EMILY J. SMITH

Alfonso Zavala (right) shakes hands with Javier Velarde, Peru’s former Minister of Housing, during Zavala’s 1981 appointment as president of the National Water Supply and Sewerage Services of Peru. Zavala, a native of Peru, earned a master’s in sanitary engineering from UNC in 1955.

