

CLEAN WATER FOR LIFE: GISENYI, RWANDA

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Section I

The primary goal of the Clean Water for Life Project was to provide a safe water source for the Twa community and surrounding areas of Rwanda through the construction of five rainwater tanks and fifty household Bio-Sand filters. The second goal of the project was to engage the community through health education mural paintings on the rainwater tanks and to have the community involved in every step of the project.

Upon arriving in Rwanda, for the third year working with this community, my team and I began by meeting our local Red Cross contact who helped lead the project. After finalizing the construction plans, we talked with the Twa community and they started to collect stones for all of the foundations to be built. This initial phase of building all 5 foundations took many weeks and was much longer than anticipated. However as we learned through this process, the foundations were one of the most important aspects of the construction phase for the tanks to last. During this phase, I conducted one-on-one meetings with each of the families in the village about their use of water and started the health education component of the project. Through this I learned of the many struggles they face on a daily basis of traveling many hours a day to only get about 2 jerry cans a day for their whole family.

After the completion of the foundations, we began constructing the tanks through making the wire mesh cylindrical form and then started to slowly add the layers of cement. This process took many days for each tank as we had to wait for each layer to dry before adding the next. For each tank we had a mason and a few members of the Twa community as the helpers. After the completion of the first tank, we began to start painting the health education murals on the tanks. Each tank was between 2000 L-3000L and was shared between 2-3 households. Through the painting of the murals, we were able to engage all of the children and women in the painting and taught them at the same time about the importance of water. This experience was most rewarding as their faces lit up as I painted each of their hands to place their handprints on the edge of the tanks allowing them to contribute in the creation of their tank.

The bio-sand filters were constructed by the members of the Twa Pottery co-operative, and all of the women of the village helped with sorting out the sand and stones for the inside contents of the filters. We distributed 50 filters to all of the Twa households and the families in a local non-profit Rwanda Sustainable Families (RSF). The education on the filters was done through various meetings with each group on how to properly clean and work the filters. Handouts were also made and given to each family receiving a filter. The RSF group, upon hearing about the filters, was overflowed with joy at the chance for clean water in their homes that they broke out in song and dance with their appreciation.

As there were many difficulties faced along the way, I saw even through solving one problem that there was so much more that could be done. It was difficult at times seeing how some of the children were not in school because of the lack of uniforms and food. However through the interviews, the families seemed to realize the impact the project would have on their lives in the long run. As many of them said, "They will no longer drink bad water, have to buy water, will be able to wash their clothes and bodies, better hygiene, and there will be no more sickness." Through the health education they were able to understand the long term sustainable impact this would have on their lives.

Through the completion of the Clean Water for Life project, over hundreds of people will benefit from better access to a clean safe water source. Also through the creation of the murals on each of the tanks not only will the Twa community gain from the educational images displayed on the tanks, but also the rest of their surrounding communities as they are located on local road used for travel. As one of the masons

said to me “these tanks will last as long as the earth is here”, I believe this project will help this community for many generations to come. As I continue to work in Rwanda, our team will be able to follow up on the project throughout the year and with increased fundraising efforts it is our mission to expand the project in the future. This will be done through more follow up on the efficiency of the filters and through the expansion of more tanks and filters throughout the region. As a close Rwandan friend once said to me, “you will always be able to find more people that need access to clean water” I have resolved to continue with the project and continually look for more ways to help solve this issue.

Section II

A peaceful world is a world in which the common goal is to decrease suffering. This is true politically, socially, culturally, and for the human condition. In a nation where the core values of peace were once shattered through a mass slaughter of their own kind, the notion of peace has a value unfathomable by most of the world. In Rwanda, peace means a relationship between tribes, a decrease of marginalization between groups in power, equal access to the resources necessary to sustain life, and empowerment from within the community to increase community relations and combat suffering. The Clean Water for Life project impacts this definition of peace by 1) developing a sustainable way of gaining access to a resource necessary to live; 2) by reaching out to a systemically marginalized group; 3) by alleviating the barriers that keep the Twa separate from society by engaging them in taking ownership over the project; and 4) deepening the sense of community by facilitating community arts projects.

As a team we believe that clean water is a human right that everyone in this world deserves access to. To create a needed state of peace in this community, we believe that starting to help them improve their physical wellbeing through clean water is one of the first steps towards this goal. This project has allowed this community to have access to clean water right outside their homes and has caused them to worry less about having to find water on a daily basis. In the short term this project has already provided them with access to water as the tanks have filled with water only days after they were finished. This means they 1) have sustainable access to clean water, 2) do not have to pay for water, 3) have increased time in their day to focus on work and schooling instead of water collection, 3) will have decreased disease due to the filtration system in the tanks, and 4) will increase their hygiene as they can wash their hands, bodies, food, and clothes with the water.

In the long term however, the tanks will continue to provide water for these families and will teach the greater Rwandan community of an alternative to collecting water. As the local Rwandan government was very excited about the project, they are doing a media piece on the project and will be showing the rest of the country this new way to provide clean water to a community that could serve as a model. In this way, the project is making a systemic macro impact on the country as a whole. I believe that the sustainability of this project will allow the Twa community to focus more on providing for their families in terms of food and shelter and worry less about collecting or buying water every day. When our team returns to do follow-up visits in the upcoming years, we will be able to measure the long-term impact by evaluating the current health conditions of the community by assessing if there was a decrease in water-related diseases and an increase in health literacy. In a much longer period of time, we can observe how the project impacted cultural perceptions and norms of the Twa community, who typically lack status due to their lack of resources.

This experience has continued to change my worldview and has opened my eyes to the struggles of creating this state of peace throughout the world. As this is not an easy task, I have learned that every person can make a difference. I have seen how my one idea to bring clean water to this community has completely transformed their lives through perseverance and hard work. This experience has taught me to continue to reach for my dreams and has placed a desire in my heart to continue with this project throughout the country and possibly the world. I have learned that some stages of a project take patience, but trusting in the plan and looking at the big picture will help in accomplishing your goals.

“The Clean Water for Life project will continue to provide the Rwandan community with a close clean water source for many years to come and will inspire them to teach others about the importance clean water can have on their lives and the rest of their community. I have learned that together we can change the world.”- Jessica McElroy

