

Hydrophilanthropy, NGWA, and You

"The road to help is paved with good intentions." – Tracy Baker

I just returned from the 2013 OU WaTER Center's International Conference in Norman, OK. And yes, 'WaTER' is spelled correctly; it's an acronym for **Water Technologies for Emerging Regions**'. It is the University of Oklahoma's center that has rapidly established itself as a center of interdisciplinary water excellence focusing on the developing world. I will use my experiences at, and perceptions of, the OU WaTER Conference to help convey my message.

There were over 200 attendees from about 20 different countries and for two days we all talked about WaSH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) in the developing world. Social scientists, engineers, health professionals, lawyers, hydrogeologists, biologists, physical scientists, and yes, even a water well contractor – all communicating with one another, speaking (nearly) the same language: seeking ways to '...advance health, education, and economic development through sustainable water and sanitation solutions for impoverished regions' (borrowed from the OU WaTER Center's website).

The proverbial Tower of Babel disappeared from Norman, at least for a few days. I was like a kid in a candy store on the Sooner State's plains, and I know my NGWA colleague and NGWREF President Steve Schneider, was as well.

The conference presentations emphasized small systems; certainly, there were presentations suitable for, and oriented toward, large urban areas. Still others displayed techniques that scaled to any size system. But I saw many presentations focusing on villages: manual water well drilling techniques using 'rigs' made of local materials, rooftop rainwater harvesting, point-of-use water purification systems, etc. It was inspiring to see what people could do when confronted with a problem.

Now wait a minute... Why I have I spent so much time waxing enthusiastic about a water center's conference at the University of Oklahoma in an editorial written for a journal of the National Ground Water Association? It's simple, actually: an NGWA event played a major role in the creation of the center and its subsequent conferences. That same event crystallized a latent community and produced a path forward for those of us interested in developing countries.

In May 2005, the NGWA convened its first Groundwater Summit in San Antonio, TX. One of the sessions at that Summit dealt with *Groundwater in Developing Countries*. I was surprised when 14 abstracts were submitted, many by people unknown to me. The SRO session was one of the most amazing I had ever attended. Every presenter and many of the attendees stayed around long after the session ended to discuss what they had heard and identify next steps. The enthusiasm and passion were palpable. Could they be maintained and nurtured? What came out of that impromptu meeting were two action

items: 1) convene another such session at the 2006 Summit; and 2) form a Developing Countries Interest Group (DCIG) under the aegis of NGWA.

One of the attendees was Dr. David Sabatini of the University of Oklahoma, someone I had met in the early 1990s but with whom I had lost touch. He agreed to co-convene a session with me at the 2006 Summit and support the DCIG. He credits that 2005 Summit event as one of the inspirations behind the creation of the OU WaTER Center, which he now heads.

What came out of that seminal San Antonio session and subsequent ones was the realization that there were many people in the groundwater industry – academe, private sector, and government – working as *hydrophilanthropists* – people who donate time, money, skill, and resources to assist those who seek clean water and sanitation. Some had been doing this for quite some time. Why did I not know this? *Because I had not been looking for such people!* Once I started looking, hydrophilanthropists were coming out of the woodwork, especially in NGWA. Two I know well are Steve Schneider and Stuart Smith. Steve is an engineer, MGWC, NGWREF President, and businessman (Schneider Drilling Co.). He develops groundwater supplies for the Tarahumara Indians in Mexico and recently dedicated much of his time and a significant amount of his own money to produce the remarkable booklet, *Water Supply Well Guidelines for Use in Developing Countries*. It has become a hit - translated into Swahili with Spanish, Mandarin, Dari (Afghanistan), and French likely in the offing. Steve just doesn't want to help people, he wants to teach them to help themselves and do the job right. Stuart is a hydrogeologist, microbiologist, CGWP, and partner in Smith-Comeskey Ground Water Science LLC and Ground+Water Tanzania, Ltd. He has worked in Tanzania since the late 1990s doing business and project development. Like Steve, he wants people to solve their own problems and so he provides them with the skills necessary to do so. He also wants work done right, so it will last. Yes – sustainable projects

Steve and Stuart are not the only NGWA members who bring water and skills to the developing world; there are many. But more are needed to help the *billions* without safe water and sanitation. *You* have the abilities to help others and teach them self-sufficiency. You need not travel to the ends of the Earth to do so.

You are now asking yourself, 'What can I do? The problem is so large.' Plenty.

Talk to me.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

Published in *WWJ* (page 8); see <http://is.gd/kSSQkA>