

Rotarians Aid Effort to Bring Water to Poor Neighborhood

By MARK BAKER
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It's no wonder Chippewa Falls celebrates Pure Water Days each August.

Our city's heritage is linked closely with our natural resources. Clean air. Fertile land. Plentiful forests.

And water. Lots of clean, fresh, pure water.

Bolivia is a beautiful country, too. But just as we have an abundance of clean water, many residents of Cochabamba suffer from a scarcity of water.

Take the neighborhoods of Buena Vista and Illimani. These parts of the Cochabamba valley were settled a few decades back by squatters who fled the high plains of La Paz. They built their tiny brick houses along dirt roads, overlooking the city of 500,000.

Slowly but surely the number of squatters, and the number of houses, grew.

Because the squatters are dirt poor and unwanted – the outcasts of society -- few services were provided by the government. To this day, the roads are nothing more than dirt trails, deeply rutted, running up the side of the valley.

When Anna Haarman first arrived from Holland in 1996, none of the homes had electricity. Even worse, none were served by a water utility. No one can turn a tap on and enjoy running water.

Instead, residents bought 55-gallon drums that used to hold industrial chemicals. Mobile Oil drums are especially evident as we drive through the dirt roads in the two communities. Once a week, a privately owned water company sends a truck out to fill the 55-gallon drums. Blue plastic is placed over the top to keep the dust and insects out.

As the week goes on, residents use this water for cooking, cleaning and bathing.

Due to the highly unsanitary method of storing water, the mortality rate in Buena Vista and Illimani is through the roof. One estimate is that only three of 10 children in these neighborhoods live to age 10. Many children die from dysentery.

Haarman first discovered the problem when she came to Bolivia a decade ago as a volunteer. She became friends with an RN who was working at Solomon Klein, a home for orphaned and unwanted children run by Amanecer Foundation. That eventually led her to the Buena Vista neighborhood.

The school attended by Buena Vista children was nothing more than a small two room shack of two-by-fours covered with plaster. Working with a foundation in her native Holland, she began to raise money to upgrade and expand the school.

But Anna was shocked to see that the school did not have water.

“How can you run a school with all these little kids and not have water?” she asked. “You need water!”

So she began working with people who could make it happen. She teamed up with Rotary Clubs in Ketchikan, Alaska, Chippewa Falls, Wis., Port Angeles, Wash., and a handful of other clubs. They included the Rotary Club Tunari of Cochabamba and clubs in Hawaii and Japan.

“David Crane asked if we could help,” said Tim Johnson, a member of the Rotary Club Tunari. “Rotary was going to do it by itself, but it couldn’t.”

Originally, the clubs thought they could simply dig a well and hook up it up to a storage tank, then distribute water to the neighborhoods. But it wasn’t that simple. Clean water couldn’t be found.

After several starts and stops, the clubs partnered with Cochabamba’s water utility to make the water project happen, said Andrew Dane, a member of the Chippewa Falls Rotary Club who works with the University of Wisconsin Extension Service.

Over the last year, some progress was made, said Dane. The city utility is overseeing the construction of a huge storage tank at the top of the valley. Plans call for it to eventually feed water to five smaller tanks in the area. Work on that project is evident, with iron and concrete slowly – and the operative word there is slowly-- going up.

Nothing happens fast in Bolivia, says Johnson. What takes one year in the U.S. will take three in Bolivia, if it gets done at all.

“Every water project is far behind, government or private,” he said.

Dane is optimistic that despite the setbacks, the project has a good chance of being completed. He noted that the city utility is now partnering with the Agua Tuya (Water for You) program.

“Agua Tuya is a program run by Plastiforte, a family-owned private Bolivian company that manufactures water pipe and fixtures,” said Dane. “It was developed specifically to assist communities in the Cochabamba area that are looking to build their own community-based water systems.”

Over the past several years Agua Tuya has worked with over 150 communities in the region, said Dane. He had the chance to visit with leaders from two of the communities that have worked extensively with Agua Tuya during the recent visit.

“We were very impressed with their commitment to not only helping communities build their own water systems but with their efforts to train and empower local communities to manage and maintain their water systems,” said Dane.

Haarman, too, is optimistic that water will eventually come to the two neighborhoods. She points to the beautiful school that sits as a centerpiece of the community. Through patience, hard work, and a lot of sacrifice, that old two-room school is now a beautiful two-story school building that would fit in anywhere in the U.S.

Its clean white tile floors and bright, modern design make it a magnet for the 500 children who live in the neighborhood. Thanks to the effort of people like Haarman and Tom Moore, a Rotarian from Port Angeles, Washington, the school now has computers and plenty of books in its library.

“This is what the water project is all about,” said Moore.