

Safe drinking water becomes a calling

The donor Jim Gehrels

THE GIFT: Raising more than \$300,000 annually

THE CAUSE: Lifewater Canada

THE REASON: Drilling water wells in Africa

When Jim Gehrels was diagnosed with a degenerative eye condition in the late 1980s, he knew he had to rethink his life.

"My initial plan was to work, and when I retired, look for opportunities to give back," said Mr. Gehrels, 48, who lives in Thunder Bay, Ont.

"I realized that if I waited to do that, I may not be able to do anything any more."

He tried doing volunteer work in Honduras, but found his true calling after meeting Reverend Sam Freeman, a pastor from Liberia.

"He said it was pointless to talk to people about the love of God when they are dying because they don't have safe drinking water."

The comments struck Mr. Gehrels, who is a hydro geologist with the Ontario Ministry of the Environment and specializes in water quality issues. "I thought, 'Hey there is something I can make a difference in and do something about.'"

In 1995, Mr. Gehrels travelled to Liberia with volunteers from Lifewater International, a California-based charity. They installed a simple well and taught villagers how to operate it. Mr. Gehrels quickly realized he wanted to do more.

"I couldn't shake the image of all these beautiful kids and



Jim Gehrels, a hydro geologist, founded Lifewater Canada to drill wells in Africa for children such as these in Liberia. LIFEWATER CANADA

the thought of, if we don't do something, and we have the power to, then they're not going to be here," he said.

With the help of his wife, Lynda, and some friends, Mr. Gehrels created Lifewater Canada and began drilling more wells in Liberia.

Each well costs about \$2,500 and Lifewater provides training and ongoing assistance to keep the pump operating. So far, the group has put in more than 300 wells and built dozens of washrooms across Liberia and parts of Nigeria. Mr. Gehrels and a small group of volunteers

raise about \$350,000 annually to keep the project going, with most of the money coming from schools, churches and community groups.

Mr. Gehrels' eyesight has worsened over the years and he now uses a white cane to get around. But that hasn't slowed

him down.

"Years ago I thought it would. But if anything, it has been more of a rallying point for people. They say, 'Hey, if a blind guy can do this kind of stuff, how much more can I do?'"

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