

Wellspring of Joy Stems from a Crystal Clear Vision

Volunteers Save Countless Lives in Africa by Drilling Wells for Clean Water

Vision. It's anything but black and white. Some, while seeing the world in 20/20, only see themselves. Others may look to the world with a clear vision of how they can benefit those around them – even when they themselves are losing sight. Such is the case for Jim Gehrels, founder of Lifewater Canada, a nonprofit humanitarian organization that helps people in Third World countries.

“Lifewater Canada exists because every 15 seconds in Third World countries a child is dying before reaching the age of five,” Gehrels said. “We believe that everybody is created equal and that life is sacred. Where you are born should not determine whether you live or die.” Yet, without clean drinking water, millions of people in third world countries are dying each year.

Gehrels has never let an obstacle get him down. He is legally blind, having only five degrees of sight due to an incurable genetic disease, but has always seen the world with a clear vision. And with the help of Lone Star Drills, providing clean drinking water to help hundreds of thousands of people has been a key part of that vision.

In 1993, Gehrels used his experience as a hydro-geologist and made a trip to Kenya with Lifewater International. It was during this trip that Gehrels discovered Lone Star Drills, and made the decision to start his own non-profit. In 1995, Lifewater Canada was founded. Lifewater Canada is run by professional well drillers, hydro-geologists, environmental specialists and nurses who volunteer their time and energy to equip the rural poor in Africa and Haiti with portable Lone Star drill rigs and other simple equipment. Lifewater Canada also trains workers to build wells and washrooms at orphanages, clinics, schools and villages where people have been drinking from stagnant swamps and have not had access to indoor toilet facilities.



Jim Gehrels, founder of Lifewater Canada, trains new workers in Liberia how to safely drill water wells with an LS100 from Lone Star Drills. A strong component of Lifewater's program is local involvement at every level.

To run a successful operation, Lifewater Canada focuses on keeping costs down. In addition to being run completely by volunteers, it does so by using simple technologies and obtaining donor funding to make projects affordable. The Lifewater Canada team also trains local workers and encourages village participation to build wells and washrooms.

A SHARED VISION

Gehrel's first well-drilling journey was to Liberia, a country in West Africa, where, despite civil war,, he joined a group of volunteers and helped drill wells to provide clean drinking water and save lives.

“During our first visit to Liberia, we saw people drinking out of gutters, salty swamps and shallow holes in their back yards,” Gehrels said. “All the piped water had been cut off due to the civil war.”

Due to this devastation, Gehrels began his initial water program in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia. Equipped with the Lone Star LS100 drill, Gehrels began drilling wells at major street intersections and common market locations to give residents access to safe water. It was this drilling success that sparked Lifewater Canada and led to 25 trips to Kenya, Nigeria, Haiti and Liberia and more than 700 clean drinking wells. The trip didn't only spark Lifewater Canada as an organization; it also sparked a long-term relationship with Lone Star Drills.

Little Beaver's Lone Star Drills, a line of portable water well drills, are designed to meet the portability and operational challenges faced in underdeveloped countries. Located in Livingston, Texas, Lone Star Drills help bring clean water to areas that need it most. Its mission and goals go hand-in-hand with Lifewater Canada, and is a significant reason for the strength of the relationship.

“I remember calling Lone Star regarding the drill during that first trip,” Gehrels recalled. “While on the phone, Lone Star mentioned they shared the story of my journey in Liberia with a foundation. The foundation was so impressed that it paid for the drill rig. It was an incredibly moving moment and reaffirmed the work I was doing.”



Joe Qua Qua, head driller, has nine years of experience operating the LS100 by Lone Star Drills. He and the team are drilling a well for a village near the Bensonville Highway in Liberia.

Gehrels emphasizes that it's the kind of bond the two companies have shared from the very start and maintained to this day. Designated leaders in Liberia, Haiti, Kenya or Nigeria can contact Lone Star at any time, and the company will ship whatever is needed for them to repair a drilling rig and invoice Lifewater Canada. It's a connection based on trust and common vision.

Lifewater Canada has also completed testing on Lone Star products over the years. As part of that prototype testing process, Joe Haynes, owner of Little Beaver, has even paid his own way to travel to Africa to see the equipment in action and provide on-site modifications as needed.

Gehrels says, it's been "the ultimate in customer service."

THE RIGHT TOOLS

Throughout the years, Lifewater Canada has made a significant investment in its partnership with Lone Star Drills. The company currently owns a drill in Kenya, one in Nigeria, two in Haiti and four in Liberia. The drills range from the LS100 to the LS350, and have been beneficial to both Lifewater Canada and the countries they serve.

The Lone Star drills are ideal for the work that Lifewater does as they are easily transported to rural areas. In fact, they are compact and lightweight enough to be carried over rope bridges if needed. Yet, they still provide enough power for the roughest of terrains. The LS350 can drill wells down to 200 feet into some hard rock formations, which has been ideal for the locations that need wells deeper than 100 feet.

Lifewater Canada isn't only focused on drilling new wells, however. It's also important to ensure old wells are not falling out of service even as new wells are being created. During this process, the team takes old, non-producing wells and works to get them flowing again.

Lone Star doesn't stop at just providing drills for the teams; the company also provides equipment to do all related aspects of bringing water to people who need it. Lone Star equips the Lifewater teams with mud pumps, hydraulic power units and other drilling accessories, including drill bits and drill pipe. In fact, Lone Star has provided every possible tool that workers may need while drilling, even if the company does not manufacture the items.

“Lone Star has gone beyond the call of duty to ensure that we have everything we need to use the machines effectively,” said Gehrels. “This is a critical factor when drilling in extreme conditions far from home.”

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Another secret to Lifewater’s success is in building the capacity of the local people. Lifewater encourages the establishment of local organizations, boards of directors, management and volunteers to work directly with the villages in need.

“For our projects to have long-term success, community members must be willing to come together,” Gehrels noted. “Villagers perform maintenance, raise repair funds and establish rules such as who will be the caretaker in charge, when the pump should be locked, when water can be drawn, and how users must contribute toward required pump repair work.”

Training also is a key element of Lifewater Canada’s work and programs. Periodically, skilled professionals from North America travel overseas to train local workers, using their vacation time and paying for the cost of the trips themselves.

Training includes classroom and theory on topics such as hydro-geology, business planning, disease transmission and equipment maintenance. Significant time is one-on-one, providing practical, hands-on experience in the field, including training on hand pump repair, drill training, water quality testing, caretaker and pump repair technician training and community health and hygiene.

In each community Lifewater Canada visits, the company also works with community leaders to develop a water supply agreement. This agreement sets forth the program within the community addressing the local needs and capacity, and designates a well or washroom caretaker and a repair technician. For each well project, Lifewater also leaves the required tools with the local village chief.

HELPING HANDS

Along with Lifewater’s volunteers and the local people trained through the water program agreement, sponsors are a huge part of the success and affordability of Lifewater Canada’s work.

“Without a project sponsor, a well that could cost \$3,500 to drill may as well cost millions in these grass hut villages where the people are only making a dollar a day,” Gehrels said. He added that all the work that goes into coordinating the projects, training workers and gathering funds is completely worth it. And the gratitude of the people who benefit gives Gehrels proof that he’s doing exactly what he should be.



Jim Gehrels, founder of Lifewater Canada, with children at the 19th Street Beach in Monrovia. At the time Gehrels founded the non-profit, 25 percent of children in developing countries were dying from diseases related to unsanitary water.

“On behalf of the elders and people of Sarkin Noma village, there are hardly enough words to express our gratitude for the gift of life that was given to us by your group,” read a letter from the Sarkin Noma Well Committee. Lifewater Canada received the letter after installing a well in a rural Nigerian village that is home to 128 subsistence farmers.

“Every time clean water starts to come out of our wells for the first time is like a miracle,” Gehrels said. “You see this water turn from murky brown to crystal clear, and then you see the joy on the people’s faces. People begin dancing and celebrating, and their joy is contagious and a reaffirmation of all the work that we’re doing.”

Despite Gehrels fading vision, his clarity for Lifewater Canada together with Lone Star Drills products has brought clear water to thousands. And it has allowed countless villagers through Africa and Haiti to rejoice, receive comfort and joy, and thrive.