

# He can see the need

## Blind man's their saviour

Sometimes the blind can lead the thirsty to water and also make sure it is safe to drink.

Sometimes a life-saver doesn't wear a cape, carry a weapon or swing in from a tree to save the troubled, but instead comes in the form of a 48-year-old Ontario public servant who gets around Africa with a white cane in one hand and a drill bit in the other.

It's not lost on Jim Gehrels that if he was not diagnosed with the blinding retinitis pigmentosa in the early 1990s, more than 100,000 Africans might not have clean drinking water today.



Joe Warmington

"My master plan was to one day retire and then look for ways to put my faith into action," said the father of three grown children who is a groundwater expert for Ontario's Ministry of Environment in Thunder Bay. "When I realized I was going blind I thought I'd better not wait."

When he heard a Liberian preacher talk about people dying from poison water he knew as a "hydrogeologist" he could help and teamed up with fellow public servant Glenn Stronks to form Lifewater Canada.

"We thought we would go to Africa, drill two wells and then leave."

That was 1995. There have been dozens of trips back since and more than 300 wells drilled, providing water for more than 120,000 people.

"There were so many scary moments," he said, including having an AK-47 pointed at his head by rebel forces. As scary as this was, he said, nothing is scarier than seeing the horrible plight of fellow human beings.

"The children were so beautiful and yet so vulnerable. It broke our hearts because 25% of them were dying before the age of five," he said. "We had to help them."

There are now teams of people travelling to several African countries like Liberia, Nigeria and Kenya each year to help bring water to villages. "It's all volunteer," he said. "We don't have a bunch of white guys with big salary-needs to suck all of the donors' money."

In fact, he said, 96.5% of the estimated \$400,000 annual donations gets to the actual project.

"When you give \$1, that whole dollar goes directly to Africa. We work out of our



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LIFEWATER.CA

Jim Gehrels is part of a group called Lifewater.ca, a group of volunteers that trains, equips and supports the rural poor in Africa to drill wells and build washrooms.

homes, pay our own way there and expenses come out of our pockets," he said, adding the only pay is \$10 a day and rice for Africans who are trained to drill the wells.

If you want to contact Lifewater, it's at 307 Euclid Ave. Suite 194, Thunder Bay, Ont., P6E-5L1 or available for contact through the Lifewater.ca website.

I found Gehrels an interesting man: A gentle speaker who doesn't blow his own horn. I heard about him from my former Toronto Sun colleague Alan Cairns, who now works in government. He knows I love writing about real heroes — not just those making seven figures, but the ones using this life to make a difference.

Gehrels told me a story of a grandmother named Elizabeth from the Bassa Tribe who no longer fears the death of a newborn grandchild while blessing him with that first drink of water.

"She had three of them die previous," he said, adding there are hundreds of stories like that. "A child dies in Africa every 12 seconds. If I had a dream for the world it would be where you are born would not determine if you live or die."

In Africa they call him Gu-Ma-Sol, which in Bassa language means strong like a rock — not because of his

six-foot-three frame but because he keeps coming back.

But the Willowdale native and Newtonbrook Secondary School graduate, who went on to get his master's at the University of Waterloo, says it's the kind African people who inspire him to return.

"They have nothing and find so much joy in life where in more prosperous places they have so much but grumble a lot. They tend to focus on who has less than them, where we focus on who has more."

When he gets down he reminds himself of the story about the little girl walking along the beach with her

father. "They notice thousands of washed-up starfish and as she picks one up and throws it back in the water her father says, 'it won't make any difference,' to which she says, 'it will make a difference to that one.'"

Gehrels may not be able to see but he knows what needs to be done to help people stay alive.

"For the same amount of money we spend on ice cream, we could make sure every person in Africa had good drinking water."

Sometimes the blind are the ones with the best vision.

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Two young girls carrying clean, pure water.



A woman gets water, which may be tainted, at a stagnant well.