

# *The Canadian Ground Water* **Journal** *Canadien des eaux Souterraines*

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## **Old Thing, New Thing**

Contractors Profile  
Paddock Drilling Ltd.

**INSIDE:**

New Site, New Life  
A Lifewater Story





# A Lifewater Story

By Jim Gehrels  
President  
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“It’s pointless preachin’ about God’s love when they are dying from unsafe water.” These stark words from a Liberia Pastor stuck deep. It was 1994 and Liberia was five years into a devastating civil war powered by child soldiers and various factions fighting over “blood diamonds.” Pastor Sam went on to describe the awful conditions of people in Monrovia struggling to survive in a city swollen to 10 times its pre-war population with its municipal water, power and sewage infrastructure in ruins.

At this point in my life, I was looking for an opportunity to put my faith into action in a practical and tangible way. I had recently been diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa, an untreatable degenerative

disease that results in night blindness, tunnel vision and eventual blindness. The plan for my life had been to practice Hydrogeology, invest wisely, retire young with a generous pension and then give back to the world.

After getting over the shock of this diagnosis and hearing the plight of the Liberian people, I decided to start volunteering now, by helping provide safe water in Liberia. KLM and Air Canada donated four tickets to Liberia, and a driller and two other friends joined me filling these seats.

We shipped a portable mud-rotary drill rig and within four months of speaking with Pastor Sam were on the ground in Liberia leading a 3-day water conference hosted



by the Mayor of Monrovia. A week later, someone back home heard what we were doing and generously offered to pay for the LS100 drill rig. This was a REALLY good thing because everything had happened so fast since hearing Pastor Sam's story that it had not occurred to me that the rig had to be paid for! This was the first of many examples of the generosity of strangers, professional colleagues and Canadian drilling companies supporting and growing our work.

After this we spent a month training 12 local people how to construct wells. Liberia was a scary place with trucks of looted goods everywhere and the streets were patrolled by tough-faced teenagers carrying AK-47's and rocket propelled grenade launchers. There were road blocks erected by various rebel and government factions every mile and a strict military curfew kept everyone off the streets after dark. There were so few Caucasian people, that Glenn and I with our Tilly hats, dark sunglasses and big Minolta cameras were often taken to be CIA agents or secret service soldiers working as mercenaries or spies for one of the rebel groups. This led to some terrifying interrogations at gun point and we lost most of our film. We ended up calling ourselves Missionaries, put away our cameras and risked heat stroke to tone down our appearance!

The Liberian President met with us and asked us to please return to help Liberia and his people. Despite this, we would have turned and run if it were not for the tears we shed as we saw children drinking water from street gutters and watched girls hauling buckets of disease ridden water

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from distant stagnant ponds. Twenty-five per cent of the children were dying before age five, and we had the skills and knowledge that local people needed to save many of them. We were challenged by exhausted doctors who told us that they were overwhelmed treating preventable, water-borne diseases, and that one good well would do more good than they could in years of treating the symptoms.

We came to realize that the men we had been training were on subsistence exist-

ence and could not take time off from their daily struggle to feed their families in order to drill wells for others. As we began walking in the sandals of the villagers where we were drilling, we also came to realize that people earning \$1/day could not afford the \$3,000 cost of a well and pump. This was so out of the reach of displaced people who had lost their homes, farms and loved ones that it was like charging you \$1 million for a well here in Canada.

Just before leaving Liberia we hired six of the workers, paying them out of our own pocket. We could not leave the country unless we were confident the drilling would continue because to do so was giving a death sentence to many of the beautiful children we had met. We began sharing our paycheques with Liberian villagers to help make them cover the cost of obtain safe drinking water.

After we got back, Les and Tim from Paddock Well Drilling in Manitoba heard what we were doing, and they sponsored a booth for us at CanWell '96 in Winnipeg. This was a wonderful opportunity to meet drillers and suppliers from across Canada and helped us gain the momentum we needed to be incorporated as a registered Canadian charity.

This momentum carried us through the discouragement that started in April 1996. We were drilling near the Liberian coast, when suddenly there was loud crashing noises. The drillers told me it was thunder, but the sky was blue and there were no clouds. It was Charles Taylor and his NPFL rebels shelling and attacking the city. We got out the next day using the small downtown airport that was not in rebel hands. Our team was overrun and we heard nothing from them for six months. Then at Christmas I received a phone call from one of the drillers. Their truck and drill rig had been looted by the rebels, but the drillers had all survived. Then I asked about the wells, and Ivan got very excited saying "they are all OK... the pumps are too ugly to steal!" Made with wood block bearings and rebar poured into the cement pad, they were not perceived as valuable or easy to take, and had continued to provide safe water to thousands of people during the fighting.

In 2004, the UN finally moved in and peace was restored. This brought about a shift in our work from "relief" to "sustainable development." As villages were rebuilt, effort was made to mobilize the people to contribute supplies and money towards the projects, to train local pump caretakers, and to teach hygiene workshops. After 14 years of war, an entire generation had little or no schooling and the concept of germs and how to break disease transmission pathways was new,

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life-saving information. With nearby wells and sanitary washrooms, girls began attending school, and the number of children dying before age five is now down to 15 per cent - a great improvement, but we still have a long way to go.

In 2010, the Haitian earthquake struck, leveling much of Port au Prince and surrounding communities. The experiences gained during the Liberian crisis were helpful, and Les Babcock, a driller from Bow Island, Alberta, asked me to go with him to Haiti to help provide safe water. I let my boss know that I would not be in the next morning, and we left for Haiti. We rented a city bus, filled it with bags of water, medicine and rice, and drove through the mountains into Port au Prince where supplies were handed-out to the survivors. We spent time at the Hotel Montana, helping searchers look for Katie Hadley, a colleague from Franz Environmental who had checked in an hour before the hotel collapsed. Her body was found the next day and returned to her family for burial and remembrance services. Donations started to come in from drillers and



environmental companies across Canada, and we used these funds to drill several wells in Katie's memory.

We purchased and shipped a LS200 drill rig from Little Beaver in Texas and two Pinzgauer army trucks from Switzerland so we could train and equip local Haitians to drill wells. I took a year off

work to focus on Haiti with side trips to Africa. Then the Ontario Ground Water Association took a bold step and pledged to raise tens of thousands of dollars to buy well casing, pitless adaptors, vermin proof caps, several tons of bentonite and to help communities afford new and rebuilt wells. Companies like Herb Lang Well Drilling, Air Rock Drilling Ltd., Fred

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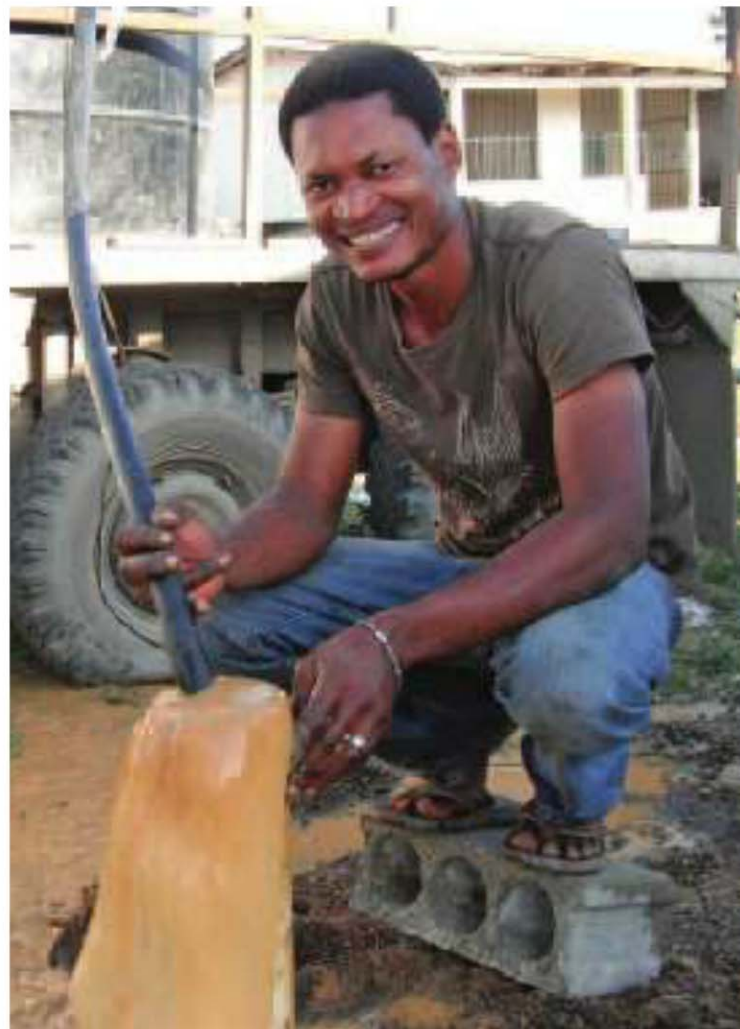
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Constable & Son, Eades Well Drilling, MacKinnon Well Drilling, Stanton's Ltd, and many, many more companies came through with generous donations. Companies such as Rideau Pipe, In Situ Contracting, Solinst Canada, Heron Instruments and many environmental consultants provided supplies, equipment and contributed towards the hundreds of thousands of dollars needed to sponsor wells and build local drilling capacity. Of course, we have to mention ConeTec from Richmond, B.C. who saw pictures of drillers in Haiti and Africa drilling with flip flops on their feet and no hard hats ... and promptly donated a skid of full safety gear to ensure that local workers have the same protection that we do here in Canada. Finally, I must mention that Les Babcock just donated his cable tool drill rig which is in a container going through the Panama canal as we speak with hopes that it arrives in Haiti in time to go under the Christmas tree!

Then volunteers started to arrive in Haiti. Driller Normand Moreau and his wife Jeanne came from New Richmond, Quebec, joined Charles and Isabelle, hydrogeologist colleagues, and Cesar Cortez, a water specialist from Ecuador. Finally, Doug (a geologist) and Susan



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(public health nurse) Rakoczy quit their jobs in Minnesota and moved with their three kids to Haiti for two years of self-funded volunteer work. They are focused on helping build the capacity of the local organization we started: Dlo se Lavi... creole for the Lifewater moto "Because Water is Life." Steve Wilkinson, a Fleming College Instructor, and several graduate students went to Haiti earlier this year and spent several weeks helping Haitian drillers learn how to better manage their drilling mud. This training experience was really helpful for the Haitian workers who asked me to pass on their invitation for others to come and share their wealth of knowledge with the team.

In January we head back to Liberia with driller Les Wing from Amethyst Well Drilling (his second trip to Liberia) and Alex Campbell from Judan Enterprises (his fifth trip). We are always looking for experienced volunteers to help teach local drillers how to drill better wells and how to maintain their equipment. If you have mechanical skills or experience in air hammer and/or mud rotary drilling and are interested in coming to Haiti or Africa,

please contact me and we can guarantee you a trip which will be a true break from the ordinary!

With the support of families, environmental and drilling companies, churches, schools and foundations, we continued to drill wells in one village after another in Haiti, Liberia, Nigeria, Kenya and Zambia. To-date, Lifewater supported crews have successfully completed 600 wells and washrooms, benefiting over 200,000 children and their families. We remain a grass-roots movement that brings together people that believe that whether children live or die should not depend on where they are born.

My eyesight continues to worsen, I no longer can drive and my white CNIB cane is my constant companion. But I have been humbled by so many people I have met in Africa who are joyful despite their poverty and illness that I cannot dwell on my problems. In fact, I have been richly blessed by doing this volunteer work now rather than waiting until I was retired, and I am so grateful every time I get to witness how the generosity of ordinary

people and companies here in Canada transforms death into life and changes entire villages forever.

We need to raise \$1,500/day... a daunting, scary task for a small group of committed volunteers. But we continue to be privileged to experience the generous support of people who give what they can and enable this work to continue. Because we are powered by volunteers working from home, our overhead is under 5 per cent ensuring that your donations go where they are needed – into the ground in Haiti and Africa. Because we work through local partners, every \$1 provides a child with safe water for a year!

Please give the ultimate gift – the gift of life. You can send cheques to: Lifewater, 194 – 307 Euclid Ave, Thunder Bay, P7E 6G6 or give online with your credit card at [www.lifewater.ca](http://www.lifewater.ca) (A tax deductible receipt will be mailed to you.)

On behalf of the thousands of very real people who need safe water, the volunteers of Lifewater Canada thank you for your support and encouragement. Perhaps we will meet overseas!