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Agua del Pueblo: Water for Guatemalans

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THE LAST WORD

Agua del Pueblo: Water for Guatemalans

BRUCE CLEMENS HAS ALWAYS wanted to move mountains. This year, he enlisted the help of 10 Furman students to help him to do just that.

Teamed with an industrious group of villagers, they moved rocks and boulders through a combination of ropes, levers and raw manpower. Their mission: to build a road to access a new mountain community being built in Guatemala.

For Clemens, a professor in Furman's business and accounting department who focuses on strategy and sustainability, the road to Furman began four decades ago in Guatemala. Shortly after graduating from Cornell University in 1972 with an engineering degree, he bought a one-way ticket to Guatemala with the goal of eliminating poverty.

With the encouragement of a Catholic priest, the late Father Greg Schaeffer, Clemens and a team of volunteers formed a non-profit consulting firm, Agua del Pueblo. Since its beginning in the 1970s, the organization has completed more than 700 potable water projects, bringing water to more than 20 percent of Guatemala's rural population.

As part of a three-week May Experience course this year, Clemens and Bill Ranson of the earth and environmental sciences department accompanied the students on a trip to study sustainability issues in the rural communities around San Lucas Tolimán, a city of about 17,000 surrounded by three volcanoes. Part of the students' research included interviews



with 40 Kaqchikel-speaking families to gather economic and public health data. With the help of translators, they learned firsthand about the challenges faced by the local families.

"We had the opportunity to eat in their homes, converse with them, hold their children, work with the men and learn from their perspective," says Darby Woodard '15.

For many women in the city, up to four hours of their daily routine consists of hauling water in *tinajas* (clay water vessels) from the shores of Lake Atitlán to 55-gallon storage drums at their homes. Up to 10 people may live in a single home, some of which are one simple room, 15 feet wide by 15 feet long. The average family income in the area is \$100 a month, although some live on as little as \$1 a day.

Nearly 200 families hope to make their way out of San Lucas Tolimán in the near future. They have bought acreage on the slopes of the Tolimán volcano, a few hours' walk from their current homes in the city.

On weekends these families volunteer to move rocks and boulders to build a mountain road to the new villages of Sanik-Ya and Chitulul. They hope the road will mean the beginning of new lives for them as coffee farmers. After the road is built, they'll need water for drinking and other domestic uses. But that's another mountain to be moved.

The cost of the waterline, a three-inch PVC pipe running two kilometers up the side of the volcano, is \$100,000 — a hefty price for the humble community.

Clemens, Ranson and the Furman students have committed themselves to helping to raise money for the project. Thus far they've collected \$26,000 through a Duke Endowment grant and through Furman's annual Water Walk program, in which participants carry water in various-sized containers along a selected route on campus — much like the families in San Lucas Tolimán.

Seeing the Guatemalan people cope with their challenges on a daily basis, while maintaining their enthusiasm for the future, affected students and faculty deeply. "It gave me a heart for sustainable projects such as this, where two groups of people can pool their resources to make change happen," Woodard says.

"The spirit of the people there is just unbelievable," says Ranson, who was accompanied on the trip by his wife, Allison. "It's a privilege to be able to help in such a concrete way."

— ERIKAH HAAVIE

Reprinted from edge.furman.edu. To support the water project on San Lucas Tolimán, visit furmanwaterwalk2013.com. The author is an assistant in Furman's education department and a contributor to university publications. Photos by James Rodriguez (top) and Darby Woodard.

