

Liquid assets

By EVE BYRON - Independent Record - 02/06/09



Lisa Kunkel Independent Record - Helena hydrogeologist Dave Donohue went to Uganda in January on a mission to help improve the quality and quantity of water in poor villages in the African nation.

Uganda is a long way from Montana, but the chance to help some small communities improve their water quality and quantity was a powerful draw for Dave Donohue.

So early in January, the Helena man and nine nurses from Billings and Oregon hopped a plane to go on a humanitarian mission as part of the nonprofit Hope 2 One Life organization.

Donohue followed in the footsteps of his boss, Tom Osborne, who sits on the Hope 2 One Life board. Their company, Hydro Solutions Inc., which is based in Billings and has an office in Helena, paid for the trip.

Osborne, a hydrologist, went to Uganda in 2008 to help install a well at a rural school.

"We take water for granted so much in this country, and over there, one water well can save hundreds, maybe thousands of lives," Osborne said. "You don't really appreciate it until you're there."

The experience changed his life and he spoke so highly of the water projects that when Osborne asked Donohue, a hydrogeologist, if he wanted to participate this year, Donohue jumped at the chance.

"A lot of the stuff (Hope 2 One Life) does is medical, but they also try to develop clean water for these communities," Donohue said. "When Tom asked if I wanted to go, I said 'You bet.'"

Osborne said Donohue was a good candidate for the trip for a variety of reasons.

"He was enthusiastic about it from the beginning, plus he has a tremendous technical knowledge and a lot of compansion," Osborne said. "He also can put up with just about anything."

Donohue and the nurses flew into Uganda's capital, Kampala, where Donohue recalled that the traffic was worse than rush hour in Los Angeles, with eight lanes of drivers going whatever direction they wanted in each lane.

"It was pretty entertaining in that respect," Donohue said. "But people were really nice and very appreciative of what we were doing there."

Their driver took them northwest to the Family Empowerment Farm for war refugees near Masindi, where Donohue worked on finding a consistent source of water for fish ponds.

Donohue, the father of three girls, pulls up a photograph on the computer in his downtown office in Helena's Power Block. The photo shows a child standing in chocolate brown water in a pond filled with green lily pads. The children play in and drink from this water, which also provides tilapia fish for those on the farm to eat and sell.

Many of the children are orphans, whose parents were killed by the Lords Resistance Army in Uganda, Donohue said. Some of the girls were sex slaves who managed to escape. Some of the boys had been brainwashed into being soldiers and forced to kill their parents, but later deserted from the army. These are the people Donohue wanted to help.

"Currently it's fairly safe there, but when we were there more than 100 people in a church were burned to death by

the army," Donohue said. "But we weren't too worried about our own safety."

About 140 people live at the farm, including widows. They're trying to become a self-sustaining community by producing fruits, fish and other farm goods to eat or sell.

Donohue's job was to help expand the fish ponds so they don't lose as much water during Uganda's dry season. He planned to use a backhoe to dig deep enough to tap into groundwater, but they couldn't get it running. Instead, they hired a couple of guys who hand-dug holes 20 feet deep in three days.

"The hole was 4 feet long, 2 ½ feet wide and 20 feet deep in tight clay," Donohue said, marveling at the feat. "They used a rope and bucket to haul out the dirt and cut the tools down so they could move them in the hole."

He noted a baby cobra chased a frog into one of the well holes, and boys at the farm threw rocks into the hole to kill the snake. He also has a photo of a full-grown cobra killed by the farm's residents while he was there.

Donohue also worked on drip irrigation systems for the farm, evaluated water quality in existing wells and constructed bio-sand water filters to provide clean drinking water.

From there, it was on to Kayunga and Aunt Vicky's Primary School, which about 700 children attend, some of whom are sponsored by families in Billings. Donohue did some water-quality tests — which came back fairly clean — and helped out wherever necessary.

"When I went over there, I didn't really know what my role would be," he recalled. "But once I was there, there was so much to do — helping the nurses, doing crowd control or just being with people."

Donohue knew that many of the children board at the school, and are relatively healthy while there. But when they return home, their drinking water often is tainted by coliform or

e-coli bacteria. By the time the children go back to school, they have to be nursed back to health.

So Donohue went to the village of Bugogge, where many of the children reside, and supervised the installation of a new water supply well. The residents were so thrilled, they gave him a goat.

"Apparently that's one of the highest honors," Donohue said, adding that the villagers then killed the goat and prepared it for his lunch. "It's stringy, not very flavorful. But they gave us a feast and treated us like royalty. What was left over, they gave to the villagers and drillers."

The villagers were so impressed, in fact, that they gave Donohue a goat the next day too.

"We tried to get out of the second goat, but they had already killed it and were waiting for us to eat," Donohue said, laughing.

The trip wasn't all work. Donohue visited a game refuge on Lake Albert where he saw baboons, elephants, giraffes and other wildlife. He also took a raft trip down the Nile River, where they flipped in a stretch of whitewater. He ruefully notes how he was so careful with his water intake up until that point, trying not to catch any waterborne illness.

"I think I'm just about recovered now," Donohue said, smiling.

Although he's back in Montana, Donohue's work in Uganda is continuing. They're designing the fish ponds during the next few months and monitoring water quality. And if the opportunity arises again, Donohue would like to return to Uganda, possibly with his wife.

"Maybe we can get some grants so other places can get some wells," Donohue said. "You look at what we have, and those people have so little, but they give so much."

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