

Bancroftians helping get clean water to Guatemalans



From left, Sandy Cole and Emma Kearns load onto a cattle truck with other Wells of Hope volunteers to go to villages in the Jalapa mountain region of Guatemala. / SUBMITTED

By Sarah Sobanski

Two North Hastings natives found themselves sitting together in Nicaragua. They'd travelled there with the same circle of friends for a holiday. Though they'd travelled as mutual friends of friends in the past, the pair had never found a quiet space themselves to really get to know each other away from the group.

This small moment of 'one-on-one time' revealed a rare similarity between them: a passion to help those in need. They shared with each other their dreams of helping a developing nation.

They began investigating who, where and how to help as soon as they got home. Three years, \$13,000 and a trip to Guatemala later and a woman, her young children and her village have a better chance at access to clean water than they've ever had.

The ball really started rolling last year when Century 21's Emma Kearns and longtime area resident Sandy Cole set a \$10,000 donation goal and chose Wells of Hope as their avenue for change. Cole had heard of the registered charity through friends at her church. It fights poverty through drilling wells, building schools and more in Guatemala.

'The mortality rate for kids in the mountains of Guatemala is 50 per cent: half the kids born die before they're five years old only because of contaminated water,' said Cole, explaining why the duo chose this particular charity.

When the pair realized Wells for Hope was helping families get clean water they knew it was the one. Both Catholics, Cole said in their faith 'water is life.' This is symbolized in baptism and other rituals.

This sentiment is top of mind for many in Bancroft following the town's water and wastewater struggles over the past two years.

Kearns said some people had been quick to judge her for helping those outside of the country as opposed to those in her own backyard.

To critics, she said she does what she can, when she can, for both. She suggested the need in Guatemala is so vast it has redefined her perception of poverty.

With the who and why set, Kearns and Cole travelled to the mountain region of Jalapa, Guatemala this winter. They went to meet up with Wells of Hope and other volunteers to help turn their donations into tangible change.

Each day would start between 6 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. with what Cole described as an 'inspiration' period. She, Kearns and others volunteering with Wells of Hope would discuss the impact they would have on the people they were serving 'a way to lift their spirits from one hard day to the next.'

The rest of the day would be labour intensive. They helped build homes, painted a local school and learned how people lived in the region.

One of many teaching experiences was participating in a 'water walk,' said Kearns.

On the walk, the pair went with a woman on one of her four-times-daily missions to get water for her young family. They balanced for a kilometre on what Kearns described as a goat path to the local watering hole 'somewhere villagers could regularly be seen bathing or washing their dishes at any time of the day. The woman filled up a jug she had brought with her and turned to go back. 'I said, can I just try?... Cause it's a long trek back up the mountain,' said Kearns, but when she took the full jug it was so heavy she couldn't lift it. She noted she and the woman were around the same age, early 50s though the woman's hard life had weathered her skin beyond her years.

Kearns tried again with the jug half full, but even then, she couldn't carry it all the way back to the house. She said she was overcome at that moment.

'I bawled. I couldn't do it. I could not bring this water to the house to say, 'Here, kids, we're going to have water for the day,' she said. 'I knew at that moment that if I lived her life, my kids would die.'

'And that water is contaminated,' Cole revealed the kicker. 'That's what she cooks with, that's what her kids drink? At this point there's not a well close enough to where she lives for her to have access to clean water.'

Since their return, the pair has committed to fundraising an additional \$20,000 by the end of 2018.

'We're hoping our first-hand experience will inspire people to be generous and donate,' said Cole.

On the last day of their trip, they said, Wells for Hope had tapped a new water vein. The money they raise will go to installing a generator, pumping the water from the new location to a central cistern and piping the water in a 'spider-effect down to the villages.'

'Each well services about 2,500 people,' said Cole. 'It's \$1,500 for a kilometre of pipe from the cistern.'

When raising the first \$13,000, Cole and Kearns hosted small events with friends such as euchre tournaments, a 100-metre race challenge and a yard sale.

With a larger goal, they're asking people to go online to donate under their names on Wells for Hope's website at www.wellsofhope.com/emma-sandy-fundraiser-for-wells-of-hope-clean-water-projects/. People can also drop off cheques to Kearns at Century 21 on Bancroft's main street or call her at 613-332-9080.