

## The Healing Waters

A copywriter, a church, and a hurricane help quench the thirst of a country in need

*By Dean Nelson*

Tom Larson's existential funk hit overdrive when he won the Denver Advertising Federation's Best in Show Award in 1995. After producing successful campaigns for McDonald's, Safeway, and the Denver International Airport, he reached the top with his "Normal People Like Us, Too" campaign for the Denver Art Museum. Comedian Bill Maher presented Larson with the award. That was on a Friday.

"I went into the office that next Monday, and there we all were, sitting around the conference room table, discussing the accounts we were working on, just as we had every other Monday," he says. "Nothing had changed, and I realized that it was never going to change."

So he quit.

He tried writing freelance advertising copy to pay the bills. His wife, Dana, continued her career as a manager for a software company. He tried writing a novel. His Presbyterian church in Denver had a relationship with a small church in the Dominican Republic, and when the missions pastor spoke of needing to send someone to work in that church for a year, the Larsons volunteered.

"I knew there was more out there, and that I'd been running away from it," Tom says.

But they were miserable in the Dominican Republic. Their Spanish skills weren't great, the living conditions were harsh, they were sick much of the time, and the church they worked with was both legalistic and judgmental.

"As pathetic as this sounds, sometimes Dana and I would drive to the Santo Domingo airport and sit in the Wendy's restaurant in the air conditioning, and longingly watch people board planes headed for the United States." Tom says, shaking his head. "We couldn't wait to get out of there."

They returned to the United States in the summer of 1998 as confused as ever about their future.

Two months after their return, Hurricane Georges hit the Caribbean region and devastated the area where the Larsons had been living.

"I watched the news coverage and called the people I knew down there," Tom remembers, emotion rising in his voice. "I had this overwhelming sense of needing to do something for them. I don't know why I felt this way, but I felt that they were my family."

His Denver church helped finance immediate needs, like shelter for some of the residents. But Tom and a local scientist worked on a relatively inexpensive plan that addressed a more long-term need—a way to provide the area with clean water. It was a small purification system that included chlorine, carbon filtering, reverse osmosis, and UV light, and it could work with the existing water supply in the community.

"I had seen the need for clean water there even before the hurricane, but hadn't really thought about it," Tom says. "Come on-what could I do? I was an English major."

They brought the system to the community and installed it at the church where Tom had worked the previous year. They tested it repeatedly-it had zero contaminants. And when word got out there was clean water available at the church, people flocked to it. Soon the church was distributing 1,000 gallons a day.

"The response to this from the community was overwhelming," Tom says. "They used to call the church names for its judgmentalism and elitism. This changed all that. It also made the church look outside of itself."

Which got Tom thinking. Years of neglect have made the municipal water systems unsafe in the Dominican Republic. In the cities and larger communities, there is an underground infrastructure to supply water, but the pipes carrying that water are defective and porous, according to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). That, combined with an inadequate sewage and sanitation system, exposes the water to contamination seeping through the ground. Well water in the outlying bar-rios is in worse condition. Hurricane Georges damaged the underground systems even further.

Communicable diseases are the leading cause of death in children in the country, primarily due to drinking contaminated water, reports the PAHO. The diseases are responsible for seventeen percent of all diagnosed deaths.

"Water in the Dominican Republic is a big problem," said John Mikos, a Tampa-based physician who works in a clinic in the same community where the Larsons lived. He travels to the Dominican Republic every other month and treats patients at a clinic supported by his home church in Florida.

"Most people there have some kind of intestinal parasites. And even if they don't kill you, they will create other long-term health problems somewhere along the way," Mikos says. "If we treated everyone tomorrow for their intestinal parasites, by the next day they would be sick again."

Tom talked to Cristian Batista, a member of the Dominican church, about helping install other systems, if they could get the financial support for it back in America. He returned to his Denver church and talked about it with the elders. A non-profit organization, Healing Waters International, was born.

Tom and Dana sold their home in posh Evergreen, Colorado, and moved to smaller quarters in Golden, living off the equity while they tried to develop the organization and raise some money. They got financial backing quickly, mostly from individuals.

They hired Batista and Aaron Walling of San Diego. Batista had been a tailor; Walling, a recent college graduate, was waiting tables. The pair began looking at other potential sites for the filtering systems while Tom worked on developing a lower-maintenance system and on raising money. Dana concentrated on logistics, finance, and incorporating the group as a 501(c)(3) non-profit. Recently they hired Tory Passons, who worked on a classic car lot in San Diego, to help with the business side.

By late last year, Healing Waters had identified sites and started installing systems at a rate of one per month-all in churches. "It had the effect of building bridges between the churches and their communities," Tom says. "I thought of it as an agent of healing, both physically and socially."

Most of the sites now have a constant flow of people at the distribution centers, all located near the churches' front doors. People come with five-gallon jugs, or whatever containers they can find. The church charges five pesos for five gallons, while local stores charge twenty-five pesos (about one U.S. dollar). Healing Waters regulations require that sixty-five percent of the money received goes to the local church to pay expenses, including wages for the water dispensers and an accountant at the church, supplies for the system (such as

chlorine and water softener), and for community development projects. None of the money goes to the church's general budget or to the pastor's salary. Healing Waters applies its share to funding other sites in the country.

Some sites dispense water to more than 500 people each day. One site dispensed more than 60,000 gallons of clean water in a recent month.

"Almost everyone buys water from the church," says Elva Garaballo, a resident of a community that has a Healing Waters site. "We never had safe water before. Our children were sick all the time. They drink this water and they are no longer sick."

Mikos, the Florida doctor, says that while it is difficult to get accurate data on improved health, "empirically, there is no doubt in my mind that people are getting better from the water. I see the improvement in the sicknesses I treat."

"There is no great track record in this country for people boiling water," he adds. "The difference Tom is making is big."

The church members see the benefit of providing water as well.

"The role of the church is to improve its community," says Hector Tejada. "People who might not have known we were here now know us and know that we are helping improve their lives."

"I know the story about Jesus and the woman at the well," says Jose Adames, who arrived at a distribution site on his bicycle-powered cart to carry his five-gallon jug. "He gave her the water of life. This church is doing the same thing."

For Tom Larson, the Healing Waters effort is a culmination of his frustration with his career and with the year he spent in the Dominican Republic as a church volunteer.

"I am in the middle of something that is so much bigger than me," he says. "Just look at us—an advertising guy, a software consultant, a tailor, a waiter, and a used car salesman. What are we doing? What business do we have trying to pull this off?"

"But that's the point. It's bigger than all of us, which makes it overwhelming and humbling and thrilling."

Foundations and humanitarian groups have contacted Healing Waters with requests for distribution sites in other parts of the country. The funding is slowly growing. By 2004, Larson hopes to expand into Mexico.

And fifty years from now?

"My dream is that a poor person will be able to go into any village on any continent and be able to go to a local church for clean, affordable water," he says. "Life is so hard in the Dominican Republic. People struggle to live just day-to-day. I would like for them to be able to come to a church, get a cup of cool water, and be refreshed."

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