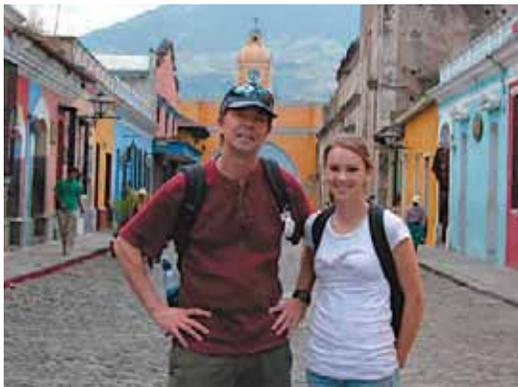


Waterworks

Serving others enriches a father and daughter's trip to Guatemala

Story and photographs by Dean Nelson



Sitting in one of the identical stiff blue plastic chairs at the DMV, I waited while my daughter, Vanessa, completed her driving test. She was applying for her license not so much because she wanted independence, but more because this was the culturally acceptable thing to do—like getting braces. It was a rite of passage.

I realized she'd soon be leaving this rite of passage for another. A small nonprofit organization called Healing Waters International was about to open a new filtration system facility in Guatemala, and Vanessa and I were heading there to help them get clean water into people's homes.

Growing up in Southern California, our children have led comfortable lives. They go skiing each year; they go to the ocean or the mountains when they want. But my wife and I worried that they'd grow up having no idea how the rest of the world lives. So we began to take them traveling. One year, I took our son, Blake, to Tanzania and Kosovo. Now it was Vanessa's turn. I saw this trip as a cultural rite of passage.

"Dad, I passed!"

I looked over my shoulder. Vanessa was beaming, waiting to turn in paperwork declaring that she was a state-certified legal driver.

The next day we were on a flight to Guatemala City.

Watershed Moments

Guatemala's Mayan heritage dates back to the eighth century, when the region was a cultural, financial, and spiritual center. Now, much of the country lives in poverty, and only 24 of its 331 municipalities have water treatment plants. Eighty percent of the water consumed in Central America is contaminated.

Healing Waters installs an average of nine water purification systems a year in Guatemala, each serving a community of 10,000 or more. The organization surveys communities to determine where needs are greatest and locates church properties that can function as gathering places for water dispensaries. It can take months to get government approvals to build a facility that taps into the municipal water supply and houses the tall, blue filtration tanks and the large water storage tanks. The facilities are built next to the street, with a large window through which people can pass their empty water bottles to have them cleaned and filled.

During our five-day stay, we drove in a rented van through Guatemala City neighborhoods where Healing Waters had



installed purification systems. We saw remnants of the capital city's storied past—an ancient aqueduct (the city's first water system) still stands, surrounded by skyscrapers, car dealerships, and parks. But most of today's residents live in cinder-block row houses painted turquoise, pink, and orange and roofed with corrugated tin or salvaged boards. Noisy motorbikes and cars fill the streets, which still accommodate the occasional burro pulling a cart of construction supplies or vegetables. We even visited the city dump, where daily more than 4,000 people scramble over the incoming trucks to scavenge for things of value that



someone else has thrown away.

We knew we were approaching one of Healing Waters's purification systems when we saw a line of people standing with their blue five-gallon water bottles. Residents carried them on bicycles and motorcycles; in wheelbarrows, cars, and trucks; and on the tops of their heads. At the dispensary, a locally hired clerk washed each bottle, filled it with clean water, put a new cap on it, and shrink-wrapped a seal over it to keep the water pure for the trip home. Stores charge up to 16 quetzales—about \$2—for one of those bottles, in a country where 37 percent of the population survives on less than \$2 per day. Healing Waters charges four quetzales, or about 50 cents.

"If I buy the water at the store, I can afford one bottle a week," said a mother from a nearby cinder-block home. Six families live on the row, and each dwelling is identical: outhouse and sink by the front door, a four-by-four-foot-square kitchen, and a 10-by-10-foot-square living/sleeping room. She, her husband, and their four children must make five gallons—two flushes of my toilet at home—last a week. "If I buy water from Healing Waters, we can afford two bottles per week with a little money left over," she said.

I asked what happens if they drink the water that comes out of their faucet.

"We all get sick and stay sick," she said without hesitation. "Especially the kids. But none of us gets sick from this water."

Blessings That Flow Both Ways

To build awareness of Healing Waters's ninth purification system in Guatemala, we went to a neighborhood called La Brigada. Ministerios Camino de Vida ("Road of Life Ministries") houses the water distribution structure behind a high concrete wall that surrounds the church property. The building has a window to the street for dispensing water. We distributed small bottles of clean water and flyers about where to come for more. Translators from the church walked with us as we pounded on doors, stopped people on the street, and handed bottles through barred windows.

I stood some distance from Vanessa so I could watch her interact with people who couldn't understand her English and who might never have driver's licenses. She was bold in walking up to girls whose hands were white from clapping tortillas and to men whose hands were calloused from mashing corn, giving each of them a bottle while telling them they could now drink water safely and cheaply. Once they heard the translation, many thanked her and shook her hand. Children gathered around her. She discovered that the game "rock-paper-scissors" is universal—almost as universal as thirst.

Occasionally she would interrupt my reverie with a barked command: "Dad—these people need water!" And I would hustle my satchel of bottles to the group that had gathered around her.

On the day the new purification system opened, it seemed as if the entire La Brigada community showed up in the church sanctuary. More than 500 people packed into the sweltering building, covered by a metal roof, with a few ceiling fans moving the air. Dignitaries in suits, ancient-looking Mayans in shawls, cosmopolitan city dwellers in shiny shoes and slicked hair—all were there. It felt like a party. Local leaders made speeches; Healing Waters staffers demonstrated how to keep the water bottles clean; and clowns handed out toys and showed kids the importance of washing their hands. >>

The author and his daughter, Vanessa, (far left) help inaugurate a new water purification system in a Guatemala City neighborhood. During the trip (center left and right), they see residents carrying blue five-gallon bottles to fill and they hand out small bottles of water. Vanessa learns that the game "rock-paper-scissors" is universal (far right).

Giving by the Gallon

Healing Waters International installs water purification systems in developing countries.
healingwatersintl.org





After the author cuts the ribbon on La Brigada's new water dispensary (left), residents come to fill their water bottles (center). Vanessa joins a local family for a meal (right).



When I cut the ribbon that covered the water dispensary window, cheers went up as if we were christening a ship. Once the water started flowing, there was a line of people at least two blocks long. Within the first two hours, the facility dispensed 500 gallons.

One of the residents, Nancy Choc, invited us to her home for lunch. She said she wanted to share a meal with us so we could see the faces of the people who would be drinking this water. Choc, who cooks for her immediate and extended family (and, by my observation, several kids from the neighborhood), prepared soup with vegetables from her garden, tortillas shaped by one of her daughters, and a chicken from a coop in the corner of the front yard.

We dined under a canopy of drying laundry that snapped in the wind like prayer flags.

Seated at a flimsy plastic table with the family, I wondered how Vanessa would react to the food. Typically, she'd rather go hungry than eat anything that looks sketchy. Cooked food at home that has been sitting on the counter for 15 minutes? Forget it. Here, I watched her ladle soup into her bowl with enthusiasm. She noticed me watching her, and seemed to read my mind.

"I should be nervous about this," she said, stuffing a hunk of chicken in her mouth. "But for some reason I'm not."

As for this rite of passage? She passed. **W**

Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. His work has appeared in the New York Times and the Boston Globe. His book The Power of Serving Others won the 2006 San Diego Book Award.

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—Marian Reade