



Going the DISTANCE

By LYNN MACHON

Photos by John Bowman



Bringing Fresh Water to El Salvador



LEFT: Bowman is seen here passing a casement pipe to his team members. TOP RIGHT: Local farmer. BOTTOM RIGHT: John Bowman (left) seen here with friend Mark Gonzales as they catch their breath at a well drill site.

THE TOPIC OF WATER HAS LONG been a passion for John Bowman. As the general manager for the Serrano El Dorado Homeowners' Association (HOA), Bowman has supervised the community's state-of-the-art recycled water program for nearly 15 years.

Under Bowman's direction, recycled water is used to irrigate common areas and streetscapes throughout Serrano's 3,500 acres, as well as the front and back yards of 3,000 homes. It's an innovative practice that saves tens of thousands of gallons of precious potable, or drinking water, each day.

Despite his profession, even Bowman couldn't foresee how his involvement with water would lead him on the life-changing

journey he embarked upon this past summer.

"I'm 52 years old and I've never done anything like this," says Bowman. "People told me the experience would impact me, and it really did. It was really something special."

What Bowman is referring to is the humanitarian aid trip to Central America that he took part in through Living Water International, a faith-based organization that helps provide safe drinking water in struggling countries.

The experience was both empowering and emotional, especially for someone with Bowman's expertise. As he says, "It's amazing to think that the quality of the recycled water we use here for irrigation is better than much of the world's drinking water supply."



Lacking a Most Basic Need

Next to oxygen, water is the body's most important nutrient. Survivalists point out that humans can survive weeks without food, but just a few days without water.

Yet, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), more than 884 million people throughout the world have inadequate access to clean, safe drinking water sources. Unsanitary water leads to water-borne diseases from bacteria, viruses and parasites.

Serrano's Bowman was part of a 12-member team from the United States who spent a week in a small town in El Salvador, repairing and drilling shallow water wells and teaching potentially life-saving hygiene techniques to local children and adults.

El Salvador, one of several countries targeted for aid by Living Water International, has a population of seven million people, with 19 percent living in poverty and 16 percent without clean water. The organization has built an estimated 700 wells in the country over the past 10 years.



Local children use art supplies brought by the Living Water team.

A Call to Serve

Bowman's remarkable journey to Central America began with a simple phone call from a buddy.

"A friend of mine, Ed Kriz, who heads up the drinking water system for the City of Roseville, called and asked me to join him on a mission trip to drill wells in El Salvador," recalls Bowman. "I'd supported Living Water financially last year through our church, so when I heard about the opportunity, I knew I needed to go."

To prepare for his intensive trip, Bowman studied Spanish, stepped up his exercise routine and got vaccinations for malaria, typhoid and a host of other diseases to which he might be exposed while away.

He also appealed to family and friends for supportive prayers, along with financial sponsorship needed for his travel and lodging costs. "I was so appreciative of the amount of support I received from friends and business associates...around 40 different people," he says. "Many of them said they could never do something like this mission trip but they wanted to support it."



Bowman shares a moment in front of the completed well with "Pedro," the village patriarch.



This is a typical roadside home in this village.

Lacking transportation, locals made a three-quarter mile trek to the nearest water source for daily needs. "There were these streams that ran brown from erosion, but in

the mornings you'd see the ladies all lined up washing their clothes," he says, adding, "and then you realize that's their drinking water too."

Like Nothing He'd Seen Before

After traveling to El Salvador, the team's final destination was the small town of Acahutla, a port community 70 miles from the capital of San Salvador.

In a candid assessment, Bowman calls the region's living conditions primitive at best. "A large portion of families live in shacks of corrugated metal or whatever material they can find, in a drainage easement on the side of the road. Most have no power and no water," he says.



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Hygienists teach cleanliness to the children in the local school classroom.

Drilling a New Lifestyle

The identified location for the new well was in the middle of a small cluster of houses and near a planned youth center, something community elders called a needed intervention for keeping their teenagers out of gangs.

Over the course of the week, the 10-person drill team used Living Water's trailer-mounted, hydraulic drilling rig to bore an eight-inch wide hole 115 feet deep into lava rock. They then encased the hole, placed a core pipe down it and attached a pump. After successfully completing the new well, the team also worked to repair two existing wells in the area.

The result of their hard work was a clean water source literally steps from several homes, the church and the future youth center.

"It used to take the locals half a day to get basic water that was brown and not really drinkable; now they can just go to the well," says Bowman. "It totally changes their lifestyle."

In addition to the new well, an important goal of the mission trip was hygiene education for local families.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), each day approximately 4,500 children under the age of five die in underdeveloped countries due to unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene. Simple and effective interventions such as hand washing with soap and clean water help reduce the inci-

dences of diarrheal morbidity – the second biggest killer of children under five – by up to 47 percent.

Each day, while the drill crew worked on-site, Bowman says the team's two hygienists visited schools and homes to educate kids and mothers about germs, how to keep the water clean, and how to guard themselves against disease.

Lasting Impressions

Bowman feels that he underestimated the effect that the trip would have on him. "The experience of seeing how people live in a third world country like that, that they don't have ready access to something as basic as water, it was powerful."

He says one aspect that particularly made an impact on him was the overwhelming appreciation the locals demonstrated for the team's efforts. "On our first day of drilling, we showed up and there were about 50 plastic lawn chairs lined up. The whole town was set out to watch us drill," he says. On another day, a local man shimmied up a coconut tree, cut down a branch with his machete and hauled back fresh coconuts with a straw stuck in each one. On yet another occasion, the women of the village made the crew a special seafood soup for lunch – using bottled water supplied by Bowman's group.

"Then at the end of the week, they had a ceremony and dedication for the finished well. About 50 to 60 people were there, including the mayor, the priest, even the principal of the local school with the school's marching band. It was really pretty special," Bowman says.

The last memory that Bowman shares is more somber, and he still gets emotional relating it. "There was this one little shack, with maybe three walls, right along side the



The local high school band performs for the Living Water team at a dedication ceremony for the new well.



John Bowman (standing in the center), along with the team of drillers and the hygienist, stand behind their newly completed well in Acahutla, El Salvador.

road," he recalls. "Every day on the way back and forth to our job site, we'd drive by that thing. One night, hearing the rain, I just kept thinking about the family and those conditions they were living in."

Bowman says that the next morning, on the way to the job site, they saw the whole family out in front of the shack. "The kids were all dressed impeccably. They were clean, with white socks and little black leather shoes, and they were getting ready to head out to school. It's just amazing what people can rise above and the conditions they can tolerate and handle," Bowman says.

That unwavering spirit and pride made a strong impression on Bowman. "I never heard anyone complain. They were so thankful for what we were doing. It was just a joy to be able to do anything for them. I know the work we did made a difference in their lives, but I think it was much more of an impact in the lives of us, the people serving."

A Plan to Return

Despite the hard work and emotional toll, the El Salvador trip only served to invigorate Bowman's desire to do mission work. "I'm absolutely going back again next year – this time to Nicaragua, where 37 percent of the population is without clean water."

Bowman says his experience also deepened his faith and his understanding of God's plan for him. "I've been actively involved in the church for years, leading men's ministries and doing volunteer work," he says. "But this was the first time I had ever gone outside my comfort area. I'd encourage everyone to consider trying to do something like this. There's nothing like seeing it for yourself and letting God use you first-hand."

Bringing the Message Home

In a bizarre twist of fate, John and Cheryl Bowman's Auburn area home was involved

in the 49 Fire that scorched 340 acres and destroyed 63 homes this past August.

The fast-moving grass fire burned the Bowmans' deck and two-thirds of their property, including 60 trees and 150 shrubs. It also burned their property's well, knocking out their primary water source and forcing them to live with other family members for a week.

The irony of the damage is not lost on Bowman. "Here I couldn't live in our house because I didn't have water," he says, shaking his head. "We simply can't function without water – I can't imagine how those without it, do." ❧