Move Over, Doctors—Plumbers Without Borders Are Coming to the Rescue

No access to clean water? Global sanitation crisis on your hands? Now you know who to call.

(Photo: Facebook)

Esha Chhabra is a journalist who covers social enterprise, technology
For Florida plumber Frederick Schilling Jr, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which killed at least 45,000 people, was a pivotal moment in his life, transforming how he looks at the world.

His view today? “We in America have absolutely no idea how good we have it and how easy our lives are,” he said.

That same year Schilling, who belongs to the World Plumbing Council, was introduced through its network to Domenico DiGregorio, a Washington-based plumber collaborating with environmental science and civil for social impact, and development.
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engineering students from Seattle University. Soon after their meeting, DiGregorio asked him to take a look at the students’ designs for water purification systems and see whether he could install them in Haiti. Schilling instantly agreed. He’d long had the urge to travel abroad, and he knew this was a cause to which he could apply his skills.

But nothing could have prepared him for what he would find there.

“After having watched a woman and a wild pig compete for food scraps in the slums of Port-au-Prince, you are never quite the same,” Schilling said.

Following the trip, Schilling enlisted DiGregorio and Fred Volkers, a fellow plumber, to help him establish Plumbers Without Borders. Dedicated to improving access to clean water and sanitation, the new organization—much like Engineers Without Borders or Doctors Without Borders—would rely on a network of volunteers to make annual trips to developing countries and leverage the abilities and local know-how of plumbers on the ground. More than 750 million people worldwide have no access to clean water, and 840,000 people die each year from water-related diseases, according to Water.org.
In the nearly five years since, PWB has organized 12 trips to Haiti and Ethiopia. Drawing on funds from individual donors and corporate sponsors, the organization has completed projects such as an upgrade to facilities at Black Lion Hospital in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa. As the plumbers worked on the pipes, doctors laid the groundwork for setting up a dialysis center, where DiGregorio later installed the necessary equipment.

Schilling has been to Haiti six times to date and has taken on a teaching role. Aware that any plumbing system is only as good as its maintenance, he’s been instructing students at Haiti Tec, a nonprofit vocational school. He’s also showing them how to install water purification systems and toilet pans. The pans, donated by bathroom manufacturer American Standard, offer a sanitary alternative to pit latrines—common in Haiti and often a source of hygiene-related diseases.
Still, implementation has not been easy. Local plumbers are just at the apprentice level and lack basic equipment. Schilling packs his own tools when he flies down.

“The challenges in almost every project are enormous,” he said. “Everything is an uphill climb, and the list of problems at the moment is endless. We are certainly working to [make] great progress on reducing some of those problems when it comes to safe water and improved sanitation.”

Volkers and DiGregorio have been building a global online database of plumbers and mechanical tradespeople. They hope to play matchmaker for organizations seeking help with water and sanitation projects. So far 2,000 tradespeople are in the network.

“The ultimate goal is to serve as a complete plumbing and sanitation information hub for both volunteers and humanitarian organizations,” Schilling said.

For the millions without access to clean water, that would be far more than a drop in the bucket.
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Thanks for your article about “Plumbers without Boarders.” I had no idea that 840,000 die world-wide because of water born illnesses. Clean and accessible water is such an essential part of life. We can often take it for granted. I love that plumbers are going world wide to help provide greater access to water. Thanks for the post.

http://www.newportnewsvaplumbers.com

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