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Plumbers Without Borders Connects Skilled Personnel With the People Who Need Them Most

Mike Flenniken | Staff Writer



Nearly a billion people across the globe are in desperate need of clean water and safe sanitation. In other parts of the world - often relatively close by - there are plumbers with the necessary skills and willingness to help those people.

Thanks to Plumbers Without Borders, they soon may find each other.

After reading former IAPMO Board Member Jed Scheuermann's first-person account of his 10-day humanitarian trip to Haiti in the May/June 2010 issue of Official, a group of members from IAPMO's Northwest Chapter in Seattle decided to start Plumbers Without Borders.

The nonprofit organization is building a database of potential volunteer plumbing and mechanical professionals looking to help different groups and different projects.

"We thought we could provide a valuable resource both to the plumbers who wanted to be connected with those organizations and to the organizations themselves, who could really benefit from that kind of expert help," said secretary/treasurer Carmela DiGregorio.

Her husband, Domenico DiGregorio, is serving as president. He said dating back to his high school and college days, it has been a dream of his to help provide water and sanitation to those without them.

"It's always been something on my mind, and this gives me an avenue to try and help do that," said Domenico, who also is treasurer of the IAPMO chapter.

IAPMO Northwest Chapter Chairman Fred Volkers, Plumbers Without Borders' vice president, accompanied Domenico DiGregorio to the World Plumbing Council conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 2011 at the urging of IAPMO CEO GP Russ Chaney. It was at this conference that Chaney was elected chairman of the World Plumbing Council.

Volkers said they made a presentation in which they explained the group's vision and goals, and received positive feedback almost immediately.

Less than half an hour after the presentation, Volkers said representatives from the 1,500-member-strong Institute of Plumbing in South Africa approached them about working with Plumbers Without Borders.

Volkers said many people with whom he spoke at the conference said the database was something that was sorely needed, along with a familiarity with the particular culture they are seeking to help.

"Everybody that's doing work anywhere has been telling us that you really need to understand the culture, because if you don't you could make big blunders that hurt you later on if you want to do anything anywhere else," Volkers said. "So, that's part of what we're doing."

In May 2012, IOPSA and Plumbers Without Borders signed a letter of intent that envisions a joint relationship that would utilize both organizations' technical expertise, assist in disaster-relief efforts and increasing access to safe drinking water and hygienic sanitary systems, and include IOPSA members in the database.

According to the letter of intent, which was signed by Domenico DiGregorio and IOPSA Operations Manager Steve Brown, the agreement "serves as a guidepost and beginning point, leading to a Memorandum of Understanding in the near future. PWB and IOPSA look forward to these collaborative efforts, which support our common missions, to protect the health of the global community through safe sustainable plumbing practices."

Plumbers Without Borders is also looking to make a difference in the United States.

The organization signed a letter of intent in August 2011 with Habitat for Humanity of Seattle/South King County to help with the rehabilitation of foreclosed homes.

Domenico DiGregorio said Plumbers Without Borders coordinates with the local plumber who is willing to donate his or her time, creates a scope sheet of the actual project - what work needs to be done - and monitors the project.

He estimated that the group had already done complete re-plumbing for eight homes this year, and has more than a dozen to go.

"It's a real nice program," DiGregorio said. "Most people know Habitat as a new-house construction organization, but they have been able to accomplish a lot more with the foreclosed rehabilitation program because they can affect more people and provide more homes to so many more people."

In the future, DiGregorio said Plumbers Without Borders would try to connect with Habitat affiliates from other parts of the United States and internationally to set up similar arrangements.

Carmela DiGregorio said they have received a number of calls from plumbers throughout the nation who are interested in creating chapters or at least joining a local group like Plumbers Without Borders.

"Not everyone is interested in necessarily traveling," she said, "and there's a lot of opportunity for plumbers to offer their knowledge and experience through phone conversations, problem solving, and research and recommendations on materials, products and promoting education in their own community."

Volkers' wife, Judy, a retired registered nurse, is also taking an active role in the organization.

"Public health and anything that improves public health is very important to me," she said.

For now, the group, which was granted 501(c)(3) status earlier this year, is focusing on raising money to get the database up and running.

"We're going to need funding for that, so we're exploring options right now and we're exploring the different kinds of databases that we can build," she said.

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