

# WaterCan Still Wants Clean Water for All after 20 Years

By Trevor Clayton

Christina Lubbock remembers seeing African deprivation at first-hand upon arriving in Zimbabwe's destitute Buhera District during her first visit to Africa in 1999.

She saw a malarial region of largely unemployed tribal people relying primarily on subsistence farming for food and who walked as many as eight miles for contaminated water. Many were sick with AIDS and tuberculosis.

Mrs. Lubbock had travelled here as (then) Chair of the Board of the Ottawa-based charity organization WaterCan/ EauVive. Approaching the site of the new WaterCan well, she and three other members of her team discovered four kindergarten chairs set out by local children in their honour, surrounded by villagers who sat on the dusty ground under acacia trees. Many had travelled a great distance to celebrate the region's newest freshwater source.

"The joy and thankfulness expressed by the villagers was overwhelming," says Mrs. Lubbock, Executive Director of WaterCan from 2000 to 2004. "If only Michael could have seen the realization of his dream - then, and today."

Founded by Mrs. Lubbock's late husband Michael in 1987, WaterCan was born out of a desire to escalate Canada's funding for water services and sanitation facilities and hygiene education to the world's poorest people. Currently, it is operating in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia, in partnership with indigenous non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Margaret Trudeau was named Honorary President in 2002 after five years as a dedicated volunteer, and in 2007 WaterCan celebrated its 20th year, a milestone for the increasingly visible organization and for which an awards ceremony recognizing its members was held at Ottawa's Centrepointhe Theatre in September.

"WaterCan has really taken off," enthuses Executive Director Gary Pluim. "People are

talking about water, they're talking about sanitation, they're talking about climate change and all of a sudden people are becoming very conscious about water issues."



Pluim is not exaggerating. In 2005, the United Nations declared the next 10 years as the International Decade for Action, and together with the World Health Organization published an advocacy guide to combat the water crisis suffered and paid for with lives by millions in the developing world. There are currently 1.2 billion people without water (approximately 30 per cent of the world's population), and 2.6 billion without access to the simplest sanitation devices (approximately 42 per cent). Dirty water and inadequate

sanitation remain the largest cause of sickness on the planet.

Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan provides these remarks in the guide's opening pages: "We shall not finally defeat AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, or any of the other infectious diseases that plague the developing world until we have also won the battle for safe drinking-water, sanitation and basic health care."

For people who are knowledgeable about the depth of these disasters and who are working against them in Africa and elsewhere, what is important in these remarks is the acknowledgement of the complexity involved in the crisis. While water shortages in Africa may be well-recognized by first-world countries, sanitation issues go relatively overlooked.

"Sanitation is a major issue," says Pluim. "A third of the world's population doesn't have access to something as simple as an outhouse, who defecate in the bush because that's all they have available." People might say "so? Why don't they just build an outhouse?" "Well, it was only four years ago we had the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) scare in Toronto, and guess what we discovered? People were going to the washroom and not washing their hands. In Walkerton, E. coli was discovered in



the drinking water.

"In Africa, it's estimated that 70 per cent of people in the hospital are there because of water-related diseases. Now that percentage wouldn't go so high in Canada, but certainly in developing countries it's as high as 80 per cent. The first thing to remember is that the issue in Africa is not a lack of knowledge. It's a lack of resources."

According to Pluim, the WaterCan Board encourages 75 per cent of the organization's mandate toward educational purposes, with the remaining 25 per cent devoted to "fun and fundraising." At home, WaterCan's Clean Water for Schools Program features a learning curriculum on its website for grades 4 to 10 (looking to go to grade 12), and the WaterCan University Student Chapter Program, which was initiated in 2001 by students at Queen's University and has stretched its funding campaign to 17 post-secondary schools in Ontario and Quebec and in the U.S. and Australia.

At the heart of WaterCan's domestic funding is the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which in the last two years raised its dollar ratio to WaterCan from 2:1 to 3:1. Speaking at the awards ceremony after Pluim and Mrs. Lubbock was the remarkable Margaret Catley-Carlson, former President of CIDA (1983-89), and whose experience and leadership in international development for Canada and world bodies brought a superbly balanced management perspective to an evening that could have been swept by emotion.

Other sources of WaterCan's funding include the university program, which began at Queen's University in 2004 and has raised more than \$132,000 to date, and the annual WaterCan Embassy Dinner, which draws up to 1,000 people from Ottawa's diplomatic, business and government communities, and which raised a record \$145,000 in 2007.

Abroad, the drilling, digging, water catchment and maintenance instruction is handled by



Africans. Ethiopia's Oromo Self-Reliance Organization, the Uganda Association for Socio-Economic Progress, the Kenya Water for Health Organization and KINNAPA (acronym for Tanzania's six founding villages) are among WaterCan's 12 African NGO partners who tackle everything from water and community services to social and gender equality. Their direct involvement provides the necessary means of communication, the incentive to invest resources into a shared interest in health improvement and, most crucially, the cultural familiarity and sensitivity toward regional and lifestyle diversity. Those running the 12 are highly educated, with many coming from a middle income and returning to Africa after studying abroad to serve their people.

"In Canada about a third of our funding has come from CIDA, and they're interested in helping us even more. In Africa, we work with indigenous partners," says Pluim. "We do that because we believe that partners understand the culture of their own people and can communicate why sanitation is so important. When we ask (African NGOs) to become partners, they get enthused."

Another enthusiast and speaker for WaterCan is Honorary President Margaret Trudeau, who travelled to Africa in fall 2006 with her daughter-in-law, Sophie. Excerpts from their diaries were published in the May 2007 issue of *Hello!* magazine, and a documentary film of their adventure, titled *A Window Opens: Margaret and Sophie in Ethiopia*, aired on CTV in the same month.

"When she speaks, people listen," says Pluim, who credits Trudeau's involvement in WaterCan as a high factor driving its success. As well is the current and perhaps lasting political and social movement to support and promote health in Africa and the rest of the developing world.

To read more about WaterCan, or to learn how to lend support, go to [www.watercan.com](http://www.watercan.com).