



[Welcomed by the villagers in Vanni Pallugollewa January 19, 2018]

The Gift of Clean Drinking Water: *How water is building international friendships and fundamentally changing life for villages in North Central Sri Lanka*

Jan. 27, 2018 by Katie Conlon

Winding along the bumpy backroads through intermittent rice field and jungle, the last village took hours of backroads navigation skills to find. But then, around the corner, the first line of village welcome: a 50-deep motorcycle squad, the ‘motorcade’ for their arrival to Nawa Teldeniya Water Project. A very impressive entourage for the village to drum up. The bus and the motorcycle cavalcade all rode along together for the remaining kilometers to the village, and the procession grew as villagers came out of homes and fields. By the time this parade reached the entrance of Nawa Teldeniya, the entire village was congregated and waiting to welcome. The motorcycle gang passed the role of leading the procession to the village’s traditional Kandyan dance troupe. Rows of young children dressed in immaculate white temple attire gifted the visiting group with flowers and kowtows. The dancers

wore colorful, traditional costumes adorned with silver chest pieces and headpieces. They glistened in the sun as they whirled, drummed and danced their way backwards into the heart of the village, and we followed. Joyous, colorful and heartwarming, this was a magnificent homecoming for a new-formed friendship and international alliance.

What, one might ask, sparked such joy and enthusiasm from the villagers? The gift of clean water – a fundamental human right, the building block that all peoples need in order to thrive – made possible through Nawa Teldeniya’s new reverse osmosis water filtration center. Nawa Teldeniya, in the region of Nochiyagama, is wrought with polluted drinking water and rampant chronic kidney disease (CKD). This reverse osmosis water center is part of a Rotary Global Grant partnership, between the Rotary Club of Colombo (District 3220), and several Rotary Clubs in Ohio (District 6600: Toledo, Bowling Green, Waterville, Maumee, Perrysburg, Findlay, St. Marys and Sandusky). Over the course of two weeks in January 2018, a delegation of 9 Rotarians from Ohio, USA and eight Rotarians from Colombo formed the core group, and numerous Colombo and North Central Province Rotarians joined for various stages of the water filtration center tour to see the fruition of the past year’s work and officially commemorate the completed centers. The Global Grant in the end will fund 13 centers, and aside from Nawa Teldeniya, the other six finished sites visited on this tour include: Bellaganwewe, Pihitiwewa; Kandekaduwa; Weligampura; Padaviya; and Vanni Pallugollewa). Committed to the motto “service above self,” these Rotary clubs have partnered to address the crucial overlapping problems of access to clean drinking water and combatting the Chronic Kidney Disease, both of which create an unbearable situation for livelihoods and health in the North Central Province villages in Sri Lanka.



[Dancers and the feast, Padaviya Jan. 18th; Young dancer in Bellaganwewe; Drummer in Bellaganwewe Jan. 16, 2018]



[Three cheers for Clean Water! Enthusiastic Rotary fans in Kandekaduwa Jan. 17th]



[Dance performance in Padaviya; Nawa Teldeniya Kandyan Dancer Jan. 19th; Rotarian Do Nyugen]



[Rotarian Rohan Dissanayake shares sage wisdom in Bellaganwewe village]



[Toast to Rotary and Clean Drinking Water! Rotarians Do Nguyen, Tim Ryan, Ron Stoner, Rohan Dissanayake, Mohammed Abidally, Senake Amerasinghe, clean water recipient, and District 6600 Gov. Deb Cheney at the Padaviya center; testing the bottle filling pump in Pihitiwewa Jan. 16th]



[Reverse Osmosis Machine, the technology needed to bring clean water to these villages; first day on the road, Rotarians Ron, Rohan, Tim and Do being welcomed in the first village on the tour, Bellaganwewe]

CKD is a devastating health impact for the dry country villages in Sri Lanka. In the past few years, 1,500 cases were diagnosed through screening efforts of the rural health ministry; and approximately 700 effected with CKD have died in recent years. CKD is chronic in the sense that those diagnosed have lifelong dialysis treatment (or a kidney transplant, which is very rare), and lifelong health complications to endure. It is not a pretty disease. Moreover, CKD especially impacts the young, male workforce of these villages, and in a sense cripples entire villages, as labor and overall village health falls.

While giving thanks and appreciation for these new filtration sites during these water center commemorations, each village shared reflective insights about the interconnectedness between water and well-being. “Where there is health, there’s wealth,” we were all honestly reminded by a young lady speaking on behalf of Padaviya village. These village communities are the frontline in the struggle for clean drinking water, and this issue takes precedence compared to other social-desirable but not necessary wants like electricity, sufficient roads, or modern conveniences. Yet, these villages have to overcome the gigantic hurdle of decades of harm done by chemical fertilizers used in these rice cultivation areas (and in some cases, are still being used!). These non-organic fertilizers leach into the soil and into the groundwater, and because of their toxic persistence, cycle back into living systems through human and animal consumption of contaminated water and food. In this North Central region, the effects of chemical pollutants compound, due to the fact that soil in this part of the country is already high in certain mineral content like Fluoride, which is also not healthy to consume in large

quantities. This region is also prone to drought, which further magnifies water scarcity issues and contaminant concentrations. Because of all these influencing variables, academics that study the CKD epidemic are still debating root causes for this complicated socio-ecological problem. Yet, the politics of delayed decision-making oftentimes puts villages in dire need of clean water in even more vulnerable positions. Installing a reverse osmosis system is not a silver bullet solution to all the overlapping issues in the region, but a first step in the path to health and wellbeing for these villagers. Looking holistically to the future, a combined multi-dimensional, situationally-appropriate, localized effort between divisions of health, education, agriculture, ecology, and economy are essential/indispensable. Bringing these divisions together for the sake of the overall well-being of this region would include an education for awareness and creative problem-solving; agriculture expertise for facilitating organic farming; ecology for remediation and restoration of polluted and compromised ecosystems; health for comprehensive health and social issues; and economic support to help the livelihoods of these struggling villages. The list of to-do's is long, but with this first step of clean water taken care of, there is opportunity to address these other concerns.

Back in the village, the revelry of the day continues, and smiles and warmth radiate from everyone present. After being wooed by dance and song, the ribbon-cutting ceremony to officially open the water filtration center begins. The commencement plaque reveals the names of the national and international Rotary groups who partnered for this project. Commemorative photos are snapped with much ado. The reverse osmosis machine is fired up and water is poured for a round of cheers. Nothing tastes sweeter than the first sip of clean water after decades of drinking polluted water. For Rotarians and villagers alike, this day of clean drinking water is a day that will not be forgotten.

But the day was not over! The village also prepared a meal for this special day, and the group heartily enjoyed fresh salad from the village gardens, curry, rice, fish and a dessert of tropical fruit. The procession then returned back to the village commons, in the shade of the tree grove amongst a circle of flapping prayer flags, and the village reconvened for formal speeches. With bellies full it was hard to stay awake in the heat of the midday sun, but the village excitement and exuberance kept the group going.

After participating in seven of these water filtration commemorative festivities, it became apparent that although the villages and customs change - this project's scope includes both Tamil and Sinhalese villages - each community has their own unique and incredibly warm welcome involving: the children bearing flowers; song and dance; a village-wide, young and old

procession into the village for the opening of the site; a commemorative ceremony; and a meal of local foods. These are some of the most economically challenged villages in the world, yet the villager's hearts shine as an example of hospitality rarely seen in the world anymore.

The biggest lesson, however, is that these Rotarians and villagers from disparate parts of the globe came together to realize their common humanity through this most basic theme of clean drinking water. The realization of these reverse osmosis plants demonstrates a quintessential example of how small acts by concerned citizens can change the world, especially for the children of these villages. In the spirit of peace, the picture of these villagers and these Rotarians bring a new sense of hope for the future. This is worth celebrating.

**For updates on these clean drinking water projects and continued efforts between these clubs and/or if you would like to get involved in Rotary and/or donate to these ongoing humanitarian peacebuilding efforts, please contact Rotary District 3220 (Colombo) or 6600 (Ohio):*

*<http://rotarydistrict6600.org/>
rotarycolombo1929@gmail.com*

The author can be reached at: conlon@pdx.edu or www.eco-culture.world

