



HEALTHY HAWK: JAMES HARRINGTON '97
Roberts Alumus Leads Effort to Bring Safe Drinking Water to Uganda

By Tom Rivers '96

In May 2007, James Harrington '97 crashed his neighbor's Memorial Day picnic. He grabbed a bite to eat and started mingling with the crowd.

Harrington is a people-person. He chatted with George Nsamba, a pastor from Uganda who was in the U.S. for a leadership conference. Nsamba was also trying to drum up support for improving the public water quality in many of the villages in the country. Drilling wells is expensive, with a high failure rate, leaving many communities without access to safe drinking water.

"So many of the people he worked with, their basic needs weren't being met," Harrington said. "There wasn't enough food. They lacked access to clean water."

The issue weighed on Harrington's heart. He wanted to work with Nsamba on the problem. Uganda is located along the equator, with a lot of rainfall, so Harrington and Nsamba decided to try rainwater collection systems, which cost about \$3,500 — far cheaper than drilling a well, and much more reliable. The rainwater collection systems use gutters to capture water and direct it to a plastic tank that holds about 2,600 gallons of water, enough for about 400 people. The systems last 35 years with minimal maintenance.

Harrington, 38, helped with the first project in 2008. Five years later, 120 systems have been installed through the Ugandan Water Project, a nonprofit organization that he directs from his home in Bloomfield. Harrington crisscrosses the

state, building financial support for the projects and assembling teams of volunteers to inspect projects and build relationships. Next year, he plans to send teams to Uganda in February, May and August.

Roberts students and staff raised \$3,500 for the cause during a chapel service last spring, and one of the students, Amanda Gilbert '13, traveled to Uganda in June to see the system in place.

"People go and they see that they really made a difference," Harrington said. "They can take that experience of knowing they made a difference with them and apply it right across the street when they get home."

Harrington visits Uganda twice a year and has a network with Ugandans who do the bulk of the work constructing the systems.

People are healthier, and children are doing better in school because they aren't as sick from drinking dirty water. They also don't lose class time by going on long walks to fetch water. Nsamba continues as a pastor in Uganda and also serves as the water project's field director, connecting Harrington with communities in the African country that want the water systems. Nsamba oversees all of the in-country work, including construction of the water collection units — work that is done entirely by Ugandans.

The projects provide jobs for the installation crew, who are also trained on the systems' maintenance.

"It's an empowerment model," Harrington said. "The crews are making a living and doing good work. The most important thing we're doing is building on relationships. It needs to be relational to be sustainable."

The Ugandan Water Project has an established network in the country, as well as the respect of

the government, Harrington said. That makes it easier to complete the projects and expand the group's mission.

He is working to develop education and business programs in the country, while retrofitting some of the earlier water collection units so they hold more water. The organization now also retrofits filtration on past tanks and adds filtration to new systems.

Harrington was working in campus ministries before committing full time to the Ugandan Water Project, which he said is providing safe drinking water to about 50,000 people. At one school, Harrington said, only 22 percent of sixth-graders were passing a national competency exam. After the drinking system was installed — providing safe water and removing the need for long walks to fetch water — the passing rate shot to 98 percent.

"They aren't having stomach problems and chronic illnesses," he said. "They don't have to go get water over a distance. They're not missing classes."

The Ugandan Water Project is a Christ-inspired humanitarian organization, Harrington said. But the mission has been embraced outside the church. He has found willing participants at secular colleges and community service groups as sponsors for water systems.

Harrington and his wife, Christy (Oliphant), have three children: Maia, 14; Emma, 13; and Lydia, 7. Christy, Maia and Emma have joined him on trips to Uganda.

"Changing the world isn't as hard as you think," Harrington said. "We've been able to have a major impact in over 100 communities."

For more on the program, go to ugandanwaterproject.com.