GLOBAL WATER BRIGADES

FOCUSED RESEARCH REPORT

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MARCH 2010 NORTHWESTERN GLOBAL WATER BRIGADE, HONDURAS

Project Goals and Visions
Global Water Brigades empowers students to provide sustainable solutions to water and public health related issues in Honduras. Providing students with a real world opportunity to actively engage in international development work, GWB initiates a sense of global appreciation and awareness within students. In working within incredibly impoverished communities, students witness and participate in the process of addressing and solving water related issues through community development, educational programs, and physical project implementation. Students return from their brigade inspired about their role in the world community and their potential to make positive, global change.

Overview of the Water Crisis in Honduras
As one of the poorest countries in Central America, Honduras suffers from many public health issues, one of which being a lack of clean, drinkable water. Low-income families are often unaware of the health dangers associated with drinking unsanitary water, and since accessibility to clean water sources is minimal, many rely on polluted water sources to satisfy household and personal needs. Access to clean water is a critical determinant of a person’s economic and physical wellbeing, and for this reason there is a growing recognition on the importance of clean water. Considering 80% of the world’s illnesses are associated with contaminated drinking water, providing clean water can be considered a form of preventative medical care. For these reasons, Global Water Brigades works to bring a clean and constant water source to Honduran families, thus improving personal health and providing the opportunity for a higher quality of life.

Overview of Northwestern’s Spring 2010 Global Water Brigade
In March 2010, the Northwestern chapter of Global Water Brigades sent its third brigade to Honduras since its founding in the 2007-2008 academic school year. Fifteen dedicated Northwestern undergraduates, with a wide range of personal interests and academic focuses, including engineering, education, international development work, and Spanish, composed the brigade.

**Community Development**

While providing clean water to impoverished villages is the main goal of Global Water Brigades, what makes it exceptional is its focus on project sustainability through community involvement and education. Global Water Brigades typically develops a three to five year working plan with a village to ensure a project is seen to completion, all the while filtering in different university groups to assist with project assessment, implementation, and community education. Additionally, including community members in the work of Global Water Brigades helps guarantee the sustainability of the water project once GWB has left the village. Working alongside community members benefits students as well, as it engages them more fully in the project. Students facilitate relationships with villagers through a shared work ethic, providing them with a better and more personal understanding of the individual community. Although the water system itself is a main priority for Global Water Brigades, it seeks to create relationships that provide a wider sense of international understanding and global responsibility.

**Project Implementation**

The focus of the most recent brigade was centered in the small mountain town of Los Pajarillos, Honduras. Global Water Brigades has been involved with Los Pajarillos for about three years to date and is currently in the final stages of its project implementation. Already one of the poorest villages in Honduras, Los Pajarillos was hit hard by Hurricane Mitch, in which its
already poor quality water system was even further devastated. However, with the help of
Global Water Brigades, Los Pajarillos will successfully be providing the 120 village homes with
a clean and constant source of water this spring. The Northwestern brigade during its time in
Los Pajarillos worked at digging and filling trenches, laying pipeline, and physically connecting
about two dozen homes to the newly finished central water system. In addition, Northwestern
funds generated through student fundraising and the awarded ISEN grant were used to purchase
project materials the community itself was unable to afford. Furthermore, Northwestern donated
a pipe threader and a digital camera to Global Water Brigades, both of which are important in the
timely completion of quality water systems.

Education

While the water system itself is incredibly important to the mission of Global Water
Brigades, its educational component is of equal value. Providing a source of clean, constant
water eliminates the majority of bacteria responsible for water borne illnesses. However,
individual household practices are equally important to guaranteeing sanitary water. For this
reason, while a central water system is important, it is crucial to educate community members on
the importance of sanitation and health within the home.

This year, Northwestern’s education component focused on maternal health and family
nutrition. Women in Honduras are primarily confined to the home and are responsible for
providing water, cooking, and caring for the children. Thus, they are the most important figures
in maintaining a healthy home and communicating the importance of health and sanitation to the
youth. Northwestern students prepared an hour-long presentation given in Spanish to the
mothers and women of Los Pajarillos, discussing broadly, healthy breastfeeding and bottle-
feeding habits, family nutrition, and water sanitation. For the first time in Los Pajarillos, a
strictly female meeting took place to discuss the sensitive topics of maternal health and health in the home. The presentation prepared by Northwestern and resulting discussion between students and women community members was a truly productive and inspiring experience.

**Evaluation**

While GWB provides an incredible source of humanitarian aid and money to villages that otherwise lack many basic necessities, it also provides an outlet for students to engage first hand in international development work. Students gain invaluable experience in non-profit organizational work, engineering application, and education implementation, sparking greater global awareness and responsibility as well as providing real world applicability to their Northwestern education. Students return to campus motivated and energized to be active participants in an ever-expanding international community.