

Global Partners: Running Waters, Inc.



Editor Elizabeth Herzing interviews Sr. Jan Gregorcich, SSND, executive director of Global Partners: Running Waters, Inc. about the group's efforts to build relationships and ensure Latin American communities receive clean water.

Q. Please explain the history of the organization, its mission, and your involvement.

A. I'm proud to be a member for forty-eight years of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, an international community with a presence in thirty-two countries. The sisters are partners who support the work of Global Partners: Running Waters. I spent twelve years in Guatemala. As a pastoral minister, I was involved in social ministry and other projects, including educational and human-rights work.

Upon my return, I wanted our sisters, associates, and others to meet some of the people I had lived and worked with in Guatemala. We traveled with GATE: Global Awareness Through Experience, run by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Then I was invited to work with their team in El Salvador and Guatemala as part of a ten-day experience called "A Spirituality of Solidarity."

A traveler, Dianne Henke, asked what she could do to help. I invited her to travel with me and decide for herself what she wanted to do. She chose a water project, knowing that access to water can make a difference between life and death. Her risk transformed her life and the lives of many others.

In 2003, she helped shape the vision for Global Partners: Running Waters, a charitable, 501(c)(3) group. Our mission is to build relationships through collaboration on water, food, health, and education projects in Latin America.

Because village water projects are expensive, we had modest dreams of doing one or two projects a

year. At present, we have done more than 120 projects, with more than half of them related to clean water. We have helped finance projects to provide suitable water in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, and Haiti. Relationships have been built through faith groups, sister parishes, high school and university groups doing their service/community learning and groups traveling with GATE.



Twins from Colotenango Huehue in Guatemala take on the tedious task of transporting water as part of their daily chores.

"Our biggest challenge as a community and as Americans is to live simply so that others can simply live."

Q. Tell me about living and working with the people of Guatemala and Honduras. How did this experience transform into a work of stewardship?

A. My life was transformed by living and working with people who had so little materially and yet lived with such a joyful, hospitable spirit. Guatemalans, who have suffered through a thirty-six-year civil war, live with an unbelievable resiliency because of their faith and community experiences. Hondurans, already living in poverty, suffered through natural disasters and responded with an eagerness to learn and rebuild Guatemala.

I was privileged to take testimonies for the REMH report [Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica]. I heard unbelievable stories of pain and suffering, massacres, and individual killings and tortures.

I was privileged to participate in Mayan rituals and work with a bishop who knew what enculturation was about.

Imprinted on my heart are images like these:

- Children vomiting worms;
- The elderly strapped to a chair on the backs of someone stronger, seeking medical aid;
- People working for a week in the hot sun picking cotton or cutting sugar cane being told at the end of their work that their employers were robbed and there is no pay;
- Filling containers with water from the river for the nutrition center;
- Stringing a bare light bulb to provide light for those attending a novena for the deceased;
- Washing sheets by hand, hanging them on a line to dry only to be marked by the dirty hand prints of children who couldn't resist touching them because they had never seen something as beautiful as printed sheets;
- Smiling, laughing children's faces;
- Learning the intricate art of making tortillas and tamales;
- Answering the door, despite the admonition not to in order to avoid beggars, and finding people presenting gifts of flowers, tortillas, even a live chicken.

I met many people who were creative in their endeavors to meet basic needs. I met wonderful people who knew how to celebrate life with so little. I wanted others to meet them. Once a new reality was understood, people naturally wanted to find some way to share—Global Partners was born.



A resident of Guatemala, Quivata, expresses joy for clean water.

Q. How has your ministry changed lives?

A. My own life and the life of my community was changed. We live with a greater global awareness. Thousands of families and villages that now have good water have seen a decrease in sickness and disease as a result. Children are free to attend school without having to hunt for water, gardens can be planted and food opportunities increased, extra time can be spent on caring for the children and animals or doing their weavings, etc. The groups that we work with in Guatemala, especially Asociación Unidos por la Vida and Accion Cultural Guatemalteca, often thank us for the hope we have given them because of our solidarity. People often say, "You're from the States. You could have gone anywhere in the world, but you chose to come to my rural village." It really makes them feel important and honored. U.S. and Canadian citizens have become much more aware of the reality of immigrants and why they come with hopes of a better life—to attain life's basic necessities, like food, clean water, and clothing. They want the opportunity to send their children to school, provide housing, and to escape war.

Q. What are some of the challenges you face? How do you foresee overcoming them?

A. We are a small group and could easily merge with other NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] who work for clean water, but I find that people enjoy working with us because we keep them connected to the SSND spirituality and mission. They see our mission as one of making God's love visible. Religious communities are in transition and looking for ways to share their mission into the future. We are looking for people with passion and compassion.

We face many challenges—financing; increasing global awareness. Many U.S. donors do not want to see their financial gifts leave the country.

Our biggest challenge as a community and as Americans is to live simply so that others can simply live.

Q. How can individuals learn more and help?

A. Visit our website, Globalpartnersrunningwaters.org. Also, check out our Facebook and Instagram pages. We are always looking for "water ambassadors," people who can promote GPRW. Retired grant writers would be a blessing! Pray for us. #