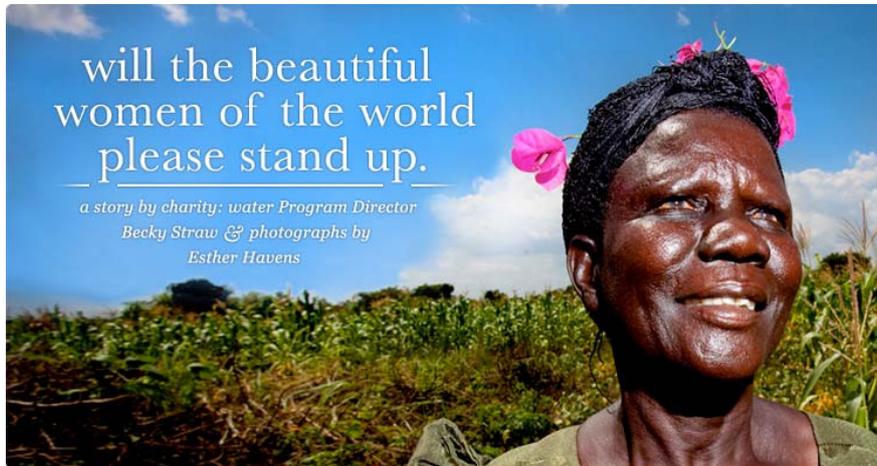


From: "scott harrison" <scott@charityis.org>
Subject: **Will the beautiful women of the world please stand up.**
Date: 28 October 2009 12:16:43 PM
To: christianastergiou@gmail.com

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Our Water Program Director Becky Straw recently returned from Northern Uganda, where it all began for charity: water. In 2006, donors funded the first set of wells in a refugee camp that desperately needed clean water. Today, thanks to your continued help, we have 88 clean water projects serving over 58,000 people in Uganda. I hope Becky's story touches you as it touched many people here in our office. - Scott Harrison

Will the beautiful women of the world please stand up.

Driving down a bumpy road in the middle of Northern Uganda, we were kicking up dust as we headed into the rural countryside. I was traveling with teams from two other non-profit organizations to evaluate the work of our shared local partner, Joy Drilling, who was drilling wells and training communities in sanitation and hygiene. Before piling in, I made a last minute decision to jump into the truck's flatbed. The Ugandan drilling crew looked stunned that I'd do such a thing, but I didn't care. I was happy to suffer a little dust for the view.

I have a pretty incredible job. As charity: water's Water Program Director, I travel to some of the most desperate places on earth in search of clean water. And while the landscape changes, there's always one thing that remains the same: the women are always walking. Whether I'm trekking the mountains of Haiti, taking cover from a rainstorm in rural Liberia, or tramping through the jungles of Central African Republic, the women are always carrying water.



From my vantage point in the truck, I watch women gather up their children and move to the edge of the road to let us pass. Their feet are gnarled and calloused: a result of thousands of miles walked barefoot over rocks and mud. With babies strapped to their backs, their brightly colored skirts sway and their knees quiver and brace under the weight of water and children. Most balance pails on their heads, while some grip 80 pounds of water with sweaty palms, a bright yellow 5-gallon Jerry Can in each hand.

I'm in awe of how they manage. But of course, they have no choice. The average woman in Africa walks three miles every day for water. Often, it's water from putrid rivers or disease-infested swamps. Worldwide, women are more than twice as likely as men to collect drinking water.

Without warning, our truck suddenly swerves off the road and up over an embankment. Dried corn stalks thump against the side of the truck as we plow through a field. My knuckles are white as I try to hold on and not bounce out.

Moments later, we find ourselves in a clearing and in the middle of a huge celebration. Esther, our photographer, pokes her head out the window, smiles, and yells back at me, "Looks like our mission's been compromised!" I usually prefer to surprise communities by our arrival because it makes it easier to

monitor how our water points are functioning without hundreds of people watching. But once you visit a few communities in the neighborhood, rumors of your presence spread like wildfire.

We jump out of the truck and walk into a party. The women meet us with exuberant cheering and dancing. Pure and loud joy rocks the village.

* * *

This is when I met Helen Apio. While most women hung back politely, Helen jumped toward me and screamed two inches from my face. Technically, it was singing. But the high-pitched shrieking was so loud and reverberated with such energy and emotion, I knew I had to talk with her.

She told me about the new freshwater well in her village.

"I am happy now," Helen beamed. "I have time to eat, my children can go to school. And I can even work in my garden, take a shower and then come back for more water if I want! I am bathing so well."

A few of the men chuckled to hear a woman talk about bathing. But all I noticed was Helen's glowing face, the fresh flowers in her hair, and the lovely green dress she wore for special occasions. Touching her forearm, I replied, "Well, you look great."

"Yes," she paused. Placing both hands on my shoulders and smiling, she said, "Now, I am beautiful."

That really hit me.

My job is to focus on sustainable development, health, hygiene and sanitation; to make sure charity water's projects are working in 20 years. But nowhere on any of my surveys or evaluations was a place to write, "Today we made someone feel beautiful."

How Helen became beautiful is the real story.

Before she had clean water, she would wake up before dawn, take her only two 5-gallon Jerry Cans, and walk almost a mile and a half to the nearest water point, which happened to be at a school. Because there simply wasn't enough water for the area's population, she'd wait in line with hundreds of other women who also valued clean water. Helen's only other option was to skip the wait and collect contaminated water from a pond.

Helen spent most of her day walking and waiting. She told me each day she'd say to herself, "How should I use this water today? Should I water my garden so we can grow food? Should I wash my children's uniforms? Should I use it to cook a meal? Should we drink this water?" With two children, one husband and 10 gallons, Helen had to make choices.

I saw the shame in her eyes when she described how she would return from her long trek to find her two young children waiting for her. They were often sent home from school because their uniforms were dirty. Helen just never had enough water.

I saw now why she was so eager to scream out her joy and gratitude. She wanted me to understand that this gift from charity: water was real. With the new well in her village, her life was transformed. She now had choices. Free time. Options. Also, Helen has been chosen to be the Water Committee Treasurer, collecting nominal fees from 51 households to use for the maintenance of their well. Water Committees are often the first time women are ever elected to leadership positions in villages.

Last month, Helen was standing in line waiting for water.
This month, she's standing up for her community. And now, she is beautiful.

- Becky Straw
photos by: Esther Havens

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