



# COLLABORATION IN WATER

BOZEMAN NON-PROFITS WORK TOGETHER  
ON INTERNATIONAL WATER EDUCATION

BY EMILY STIFLER

Ali Johnson and her 15 high school classmates walked into an elementary school classroom in Guatemala, armed with glitter, illustrated books with games about clean water, and a song.

It was the beginning of a spring 2011 semester that took the high school girls—a group from the Bozeman-based Traveling School—from Guatemala to El Salvador and Chiapas.

First, they created a human knot.

Everyone stood in a circle, put their hands in the middle, right over left, and joined hands across the group, purposely entangling themselves. Secretly, a couple of the girls started out with glitter on their hands. Without letting go, the group twisted and turned, laughing as they climbed over each other until the knot was untangled. Then everyone looked at their hands—glitter covered them all.

The girls explained this was a metaphor for the importance of hand washing. They talked about the things you touch during the day, and about how germs are spread. This game, and all the hand washing material they taught, was provided by Project WET Foundation, a non-profit also based in Bozeman.

The Traveling School girls next taught a song about hand washing. The song describes how to wash properly, and lasts 20 seconds, the same amount of time you should spend washing your hands.

“They got really into it,” Johnson said. “I’m pretty sure they took it home.” Then the Guatemalan kids taught the girls a song back. “It was really cool,” she said.

This was the second collaboration between the Traveling School and Project WET, two Bozeman non-profits with international reach. The first was in Mozambique, the previous fall. It seems a natural partnership.

The Traveling School offers fully accredited semesters for teenage girls in Africa, South America and Central America. Its coursework includes standard high school classes, experiential education, cultural immersion and outdoor adventure.

History classes, for example, are tailored to the region where that semester is studying. And on a visit to the equator in Ecuador, the girls would learn about Incan culture and astronomy.

“It’s hard to wrap your brain around because it really is pretty far outside of the box,” said Genifre Hartman, the school’s founder and director.

The students come from all over the U.S. and internationally, many from public schools, with half to two-thirds on scholarship.

“I could never get [excited about] classes in high school,” Johnson said. But during the Central America semester, “school would come alive.”

When they were reading *Bridge of Courage*, a collection of stories told by Guatemalan guerillas, the girls ended up meeting one of the guerillas in the book.

Because the school visits the same places each year, it builds on past connections. “It’s a reciprocal relationship,” Hartman said. “The girls think they’re going to change the world, and they’re always amazed at how the world changes them.”

When the school decided to get more involved with water education, it made sense to work with Project WET. The foundation is dedicated to reaching children, parents, teachers and community members worldwide with water education.

Project WET believes that education is a key component in addressing the issues that result in more than 3.5 million deaths worldwide every year from water related diseases. Washing hands with soap and water has been proven to reduce the instance of these diseases by 47 percent, said Morgan Perlson, Project WET’s international projects assistant.

The foundation works toward its mission by publishing educational materials in several languages; providing training workshops on watersheds, water quality and water conservation; organizing community water events; and working to build an international network of educators, water resource professionals and scientists. It has host institutions in 50 U.S. states and 55 countries, and offers more than 75 publications.

“[It’s] a classic Bozeman non-profit circle of everyone helping each other,” Hartman said of the partnership.



Students at a primary school in Uganda enjoy learning about disease transmission while playing a game from a Project WET activity booklet.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PROJECT WET



Sarina Scott volunteering in school PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TRAVELING SCHOOL

Every year, water related diseases cause

**3.5**  
MILLION  
DEATHS

Washing hands with soap and water has been proven to reduce the instance of these diseases by

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Project WET initially developed its colorful healthy habits books in 2007, designing them with help from African teachers and locals. Now published in five languages, the books have reached over 10 million students in 20 countries.

“The idea is to train the trainer, who trains others,” Perlson said. “We develop easy-to-teach, fun, hands-on activities, and empower students by helping them understand the relationship between water and health.”



Sophie Barrett pumping water in Mozambique PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TRAVELING SCHOOL

A video from Uganda shows a local teacher leading students in a call and response version of the hand washing song. Usually the song goes to the tune of Frère Jacques, but in this case the teacher made up his own version, and he’s smiling as he sings loudly. The kids, dressed in matching yellow school uniforms, clap as they sing.

This is exactly the idea behind Project WET’s games—people learn better when they’re having fun, Perlson says.

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## WATER WISDOM

Many proverbs in African culture focus on water and health, according to Project WET.

“A hippo can be made invisible in dark water.”  
- African proverb

Meaning: Ignorance can lead to potential danger. It’s important to be informed and alert.

“You think of water when the well is empty.”  
- Ethiopian proverb

Meaning: You don’t appreciate what you have until it’s gone.



In fall of 2010, the Traveling School went to South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, two of which were new countries for Project WET.

“[The water education materials] provide a platform for our students to feel like they’re contributing,” said Leah Knickerbocker, the school’s logistical coordinator. “Before it was a challenge to decide what to teach and to come up with activities. Now they can go into a school feeling prepared and teach something they think is valuable.”

For the African and Latin American students, the information means more when it’s coming from a peer, Perlson says. “In a lot of the schools teachers are a higher up authority figure, and I think it’s neat for them to have this idea of learning from other students.”

It’s a different way of learning for the African kids, in particular, Perlson said. While students in the U.S. do a lot of hands on learning, that’s rare in Africa.

“These girls can make an impact if one or two kids take what they learn home to their families,” Perlson added. “They have the chance to save lives,

even just going into one school teaching the hand washing lesson and playing a game of tag.”

Following their semester, the Traveling School girls are given a weighty task.

“We say, ‘Now you’ve seen this poverty, you know it exists, what are going to do about it?’” Hartman said. Each class must create an independent group project to help better the world.

The spring 2010 group built theirs around the flooding they’d seen near Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley in Peru. The girls talked to local women’s cooperatives that were devastated because their seeds had washed away. The Traveling School girls returned to the U.S. and raised over \$1,500 for the women to buy seeds.

“That’s a powerful thing to give to a teenager, but they can handle it.”



[projectwet.org](http://projectwet.org)  
[travelingschool.com](http://travelingschool.com)



## THE HAND WASHING SONG

This song lasts 20 seconds, the appropriate length of time for hand washing. It’s often sung to the tune of Frère Jacques.

Lather with soap  
Rub your palms together  
Now the backs  
Of your hands  
Interlace your fingers  
Cleaning in between them  
Now the thumbs  
Clean your nails

