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## Nonprofit goes with the flow to improve water quality

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Garth McCarty paused when asked which was harder: law school or learning the mechanics behind a water pump.

Like his job as a Glenwood Springs defense attorney, repairing a broken hand pump in a developing country can bring unexpected hurdles.

McCarty and a handful of others, including Glenwood resident Lisa Nieslanik, have started a nonprofit organization called HeadStrong Works Inc. that is devoted to improving basic health, education and technology in some of the world's poorest communities.

The establishment of the nonprofit stems from a trip McCarty took to Africa when he was in college. He and his colleagues picked nations that have a dearth of trained volunteers, and more broken water pumps than other places. McCarthy and the other volunteers believe HeadStrong Works is the best model for a small nonprofit organization that can remain mobile.

HeadStrong Works has so far fixed about 30 hand-pump wells in places like Haiti and Nicaragua, small but vital efforts to help provide clean and accessible water. With thousands of people using each well, it's a way for a small group to have a far-reaching impact.

"Part of our purpose is to be a small group with realistic goals," McCarty said. "We're resistant to the idea that we can save the world, but we absolutely believe individuals can make a positive difference in the world."

HeadStrong Works wants to avoid turning into a bureaucratic organization and also seeks to be a secular group with an informal motto of "come one, come all," he said.

Well-funded religious organizations "are doing great work," McCarty said. "But it's very interesting that the bigger an organization is, the more it seems they want to protect their reputation."

Haiti, which is still reeling from the earthquake that devastated the country in 2010, was a particularly sobering experience when HeadStrong Works visited in July.

“It’s funny to hear the tax debate in this country when you’ve been to Haiti and there’s no structured government,” McCarty said.

It also provided a glimpse at the type of organization HeadStrong Works wants to avoid emulating. After helping another group fix about a dozen wells in the Port-au-Prince area, McCarty said a representative grew angry when told about one location where HeadStrong Works had remedied a pump.

“He got really upset because we had used his materials to fix another organization’s well,” he said. “He was quite upset, and that was just perplexing to me. It was amazing how territorial some of these groups are.”

HeadStrong Works, which plans on fundraising in the valley in the future, gained its 501(c)3 status earlier this year. Members have been training since last year, including a stint with a Edge Outreach in Louisville, Ky.

In a warehouse, the group, which works to fight waterborne diseases, trained HeadStrong Works members on how to “take apart and put together a well from top to bottom,” McCarty said.

“It’s constant work to understand the mechanics,” he said. “But the beauty of it is that once you’ve learned it you can do it again and again. You’re always facing a new problem, one we haven’t even conceived of how to deal with.”

Most of the pumps the group have encountered have 6- or 8-inch-diameter pipes that feed into a water table. You never know what you’re going to find in the pipes and wells, McCarty said.

“So you learn how to fish, you learn how to be innovative,” he said.

Improving water sites is a start for HeadStrong Works, which also wants to build schools, and initiate eye and dental clinics in developing nations. One area on which the group will focus will be east Africa, which “really has a deficit of people coming in to do this type of work,” McCarty said.

“We’re not naive enough to believe we can fix a country, let alone the world,” he said. “But if we can help even a single community or a single family, it’s worth our time and money to do that.

“You help where you can, when you can.”



Garth McCarty, center, a Glenwood Springs attorney, and other members of HeadStrong Works Inc., repair a water pump in Haiti.

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