



## **Water First officially announced their partnership with The Waabnoong Bemjiwang Association of First Nations (WBAFN) and Rotary commits to support this partnership with Global Grant proceeds**

How many times, as Rotarians and Canadians, have we heard the comment; “(We) help with water projects all over the world, why do we still have clean water issues in Canada?” and then, “What can we do to assist First Nation people who are dealing with clean water issues?” The how and why of clean water issues in Canada is a complex and deeply frustrating issue for all Canadians and a life-threatening issue to affected Indigenous communities. So, what can we as concerned Canadians and Rotarians do?

After much research and discussion, a group of District 7080 and 7090 Rotary Clubs worked together and applied for a Global Grant to be hosted in Canada, with an International partner in Buffalo, and were successful in raising \$ 115,000 to assist in training interested Indigenous youth in clean water management.

### **But let’s start at the beginning,**

The Rotary Club of Guelph, the Rotary Club of Peterborough and over 30 other Rotary Clubs in Ontario had been working on a Local Rotary Lager fundraising project. Wellington Breweries in Guelph produced an amazing lager and was a strong ally in supporting this project. As the local Rotary Lager was sold, 10 cents a can was set aside to support clean water projects in Ontario and those funds became essential seed money for a grant.

During this time, the Rotary Club of Guelph’s Indigenous Awareness Committee (IA) had been trying to find some meaningful way to assist in the clean water crisis. Rotarian interest in the water problems of some First Nations communities attracted the attention of several club members in 2018, when they attended a talk by a Univ. of Guelph water science researcher into the extensive and perennial problem of ‘Boil Water Advisories’ in largely underserved Indigenous communities. With subsequent research it became apparent the relationship-building phase between our Rotary Clubs and Indigenous Communities would be a long-term project, especially given the geographical locations of the Indigenous communities. Yet it remained frustrating to see serious problems such as water insecurity and resulting impoverished economies in our own province and, not be able to assist on a timely and meaningful way.

Then, the Rotary Club of Guelph had the honor of hearing Ami Gopal from 'Water First' ([www.waterfirst.ngo](http://www.waterfirst.ngo)) speak at a Friday noon meeting in February 2019 (back in the days of in-person meetings). Her name was on a speakers' list supplied by HIP (Honoring Indigenous People) ([www.honouringindigenousspeoples.com](http://www.honouringindigenousspeoples.com)). From her we learned about 'Water First' and their unique internship program. Ami explained the relationship with Canada's Indigenous Peoples is complex and rightfully guarded. 'Water First' has taken the approach of acknowledging history and building strong partnerships and thereby creating lasting results in collaboration with affected Indigenous communities. As we had learned ourselves, individual Clubs can't develop that level of trust with the specific Indigenous Communities who are dealing with clean water issues, on a timely basis, therefore it is important to work with 'Water First' which has developed and holds with the highest regard, those relationships.

We learned that as unsafe water in a community negatively affects health and economies, it also has devastating effects of high unemployment; today and in the future.

We also learned that the federal government has the responsibility for on-reserve water infrastructure but does not have responsibility to provide reserve education or training. As a result, often the lack of local qualified personnel becomes the reason the water can remain unsafe and the infrastructure not maximized. Even communities that have successful working water systems sometimes lack succession options for when the current operators retire or are unable to work.

It was after hearing Ami's presentation at that meeting, that the many powerful Rotary wheels began to turn, both Lager and IA committees agreed we had finally found a way to assist in clean water projects in Ontario by partnering with First Nation peoples through an internship program with Water First.

### **About the Internship Program,**

Water First's Mission statement is "To help address water challenges in Indigenous communities in Canada through education, training and meaningful collaboration". Water Firsts brings western science to work along side the traditional knowledge of the land held by Indigenous people. Their inherent philosophy "of work with" not "tell how" is so critical to Indigenous relationships and mirrors Rotary's own project criteria.

Water First has developed a 15 month "Drinking Water Internship" training program for young indigenous men and women. It is a paid internship so the interns are able to participate and still fulfill their current commitments to their families. Interns who complete the program will graduate with provincial accreditation such as the Operator in Training certificate (OIT), Entry Level Course for Drinking Water Operators (ELC), and Water Quality Analyst (WQA), all enabling them to be qualified water treatment professionals in their own communities.

The Water First Internship offers participants customized skills, training and tutoring to obtain certifications in drinking water treatment and environmental water quality monitoring. The certification that the interns will receive during the program also includes Wastewater Treatment Collection training even though this project is largely directed at drinking water management. Source water is also a large component of the training which helps interns understand where the water comes from in their community and allows the community to understand current water issues effecting their watershed.

The Internship is unique because it specifically and actively recruits young Indigenous adults to the field, with the vast majority of training and work experience happening within their home communities. The program offers classroom learning and valuable hands-on work experience.

The Water First Internship increases investment in youth employment, job creation and technical skills training among Indigenous Peoples in the fields of water treatment and environmental water science. The program also establishes water science mentoring networks for specifically First Nations youth. In this almost exclusively male-dominated field, the Water First Internship also increases female participation. Female water operators will be especially empowered within their communities, as women are known through the Indigenous teachings as "water keepers". Water is understood as a living force of "giving life" which must be protected and nurtured in all times. Imagine the emotional scarring of having these beliefs and living every day with unsafe and dirty water.

Closing the gap of access to water science education and supporting interested young Indigenous adults in their training is critical to sustainably solving the water challenges facing these or any communities suffering from a lack of clean water. Through participation in the Internship, the project strives to increase the number of young Indigenous adults with provincially recognized certification (OIT, WQA); with work experience in a Water Treatment Plant; and with connections to professional networks. By connecting participants to professional networks and providing employment skills training, the Internship supports interns in securing future employment or on-going vocational.

### **Then the Global Grant process began,**

Our club Grant Guru, Ab Moore suggested a district grant should be applied for to provide funds for a Water First project. As Ab worked on the district grant, it became apparent that the interest and need for this project was great. We found that other Rotary clubs had been sponsoring Water First independently already. Perhaps this was an opportunity to capitalize on the generous District and International funds matching, available through the Global Grant process. Usually, the Global Grant process facilitated a host community in other continents, not North America. North America is usually the International partner. However, there was no reason the same process could not be used for a need in Canada. So, we changed course and went forward with the Global Grant application with the area of focus being "Community Economic Development". Our first task was finding an "International" Committee to be our partner in this application. Through long lasting Rotarian relationships we were thrilled to learn that Buffalo Sunrise Rotary Club agreed to be our partner and contribute the required 30% of total club donations raised. We opened up the grant application to any club that we knew was already giving to Water First or any club that wanted to be involved. Regular zoom meetings were used to spread word of the project and to try to accumulate as much "club" funds as possible to maximize any district or RI matching grant dollars and therefore maximize all individual club contributions. We also pushed hard to make sure the application was received before the June 30<sup>th</sup> deadline when the additional .50c TRF match per \$1.00 would be eliminated for all cash/club contributions. In mid July we received word that in fact our Global Grant had been approved by RI and we would be able to contribute approximately \$115,000 Cdn. to Water First for their upcoming Georgian Bay Program.

This Global Grant was also assisted by WAS RAG (Water and Sanitation Rotary Action Group) who posted our project on their website. From that post we had Rotary Club of Cotonou Rive Gauche in the Republic of Benin, West Africa (District 9102) step forward to financially support our project.

This was part of the note from Jean-Pierre MOUKANDA, President-elect RY 2020-2021

*Our country, Benin, is currently ranked as the 25th poorest nation on Earth. Canadian Rotarians have often demonstrated their generosity and concern for the well-being of our citizens by supporting Rotary Global Grant projects in our country. As Beninese Rotarians, we feel that it is our duty to demonstrate solidarity and reciprocate by supporting needs in Canada. It is rare for us to have the chance to do this. We thank you for providing us an opportunity to help First Nation communities in Ontario access improved drinking water by assuring a trained, qualified, indigenous workforce.*

### **Where we are today.**

On December 3<sup>rd</sup> Water First officially announced their partnership with The Waabnoong Bemjiwang Association of First Nations (WBAFN), a tribal council with six member First Nations in northern Ontario, to deliver a drinking water treatment and environmental water science internship program for young Indigenous adults. Approximately 12 interns will be recruited from six participating First Nations communities across the tribal council's region to pursue Operator in Training (OIT) and Water Quality Analyst (WQA) certifications.

Water First, after facilitating the WBAFN approval, will assist in the intern selection process and manage the 15-month training program. In this partnership, our global grant money will be used to purchase necessary equipment and provide bursaries on behalf of the interns. The in classroom (zoom) teaching will begin in May 2021.

It is our hope and belief that this internship will have a profound impact on these Indigenous communities as their youth graduate and receive lifetime careers in their community. The water operators will serve as role models for all youth, as they observe the productive and stable jobs that can result from skills training. The project will ensure that some of the interns are young women, to address gender equity in a traditionally male job category. The health impacts of contaminated water will be reduced allowing understaffed Community Health Clinics to focus on other health issues. Access to safe water will allow families to practice normal hygiene, which has become crucially important in the control of communicable diseases like COVID-19. With a local supply of safe water assured, Tribal Councils will be able to (re)allocate funds which are currently being spent on purchase and transport of potable water to other priorities like education and economic development.

The interest in this Global Grant continues to grow. The Rotary Clubs that were involved in the initial zoom meetings have been joined by new clubs that would like to learn more about the Water First Internship program. It is the belief of this group that we can and should continue to provide support to the Water First, or a similar Internship program, as it moves into new communities with new Tribal Councils and Indigenous Associations, in Ontario and across Canada.

Rotarians want to support, when asked, our First Nation's youth and their communities across Canada. We can as Canadians be the beneficiaries of the incredible district and International matching mechanism of the global grant process. We can triple hard earned fundraising dollars and assist in providing Indigenous youth a future that includes careers as provincially certified water operators.

Ensuring water careers for youth is this program's objective. As well, the internship and the resulting availability of continued safe water will have a profound impact on these Indigenous communities as they can continue to grow and prosper.

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