The Florida Section AWWA has two charities that it supports: the first one is the Roy Likens Scholarship fund and the second is Water For People. The section has established an International Travel Assistance Program (ITAP) to provide FSAWWA utility members and young professionals with partial funding towards travel and participation in Water For People programs. The World Water Corps provides volunteers an opportunity to travel to developing countries, participate first-hand in engineering work, and experience the impact of basic engineering on lives and economies around the world.

This year’s participant in the program was Jennifer Meisenhelder, who just returned from a project in Bolivia. I asked her to share her experience with us.

Continental Divide: From Rwanda to Bolivia with Water For People

As the plane descended into Bolivia in the early morning hours before light began to overtake darkness, I was struck by how the look of the land below resembled a similar descent four years ago when I traveled to the heart of Africa with Water For People. Gone were the glowing cascades of brightly lit streets suggesting the perimeter of blocks and neighborhoods that are typical of even rural communities in utility-rich countries. Instead, below me in what must have been the Amazon Basin, was only the orange, hazy orbs of open fires dotting the landscape.

The basin gave way to the Andes, just as the first suggestion of dawn appeared, and soon after, the throbbing pulsating sprawl of La Paz spilled out from the peaks like water seeking lower ground. The sprawl and patchwork-quilt look of this city with the world’s highest airport reminded me of Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda, in that it almost takes on the feeling of a living, breathing organism. Both are cities that have a pulse.

When I travelled with Water For People in 2009 to Rwanda, I was there on a data-collecting expedition with the World Water Corps. At the time, Water For People had just opened up shop there and the Corps was tasked with providing water quality data and community assessments to help determine the areas of the country most in need. It was through this three-week trip that I became acquainted with the unique challenges the developing world faces.

Prior to my involvement with Water For People, I knew poverty was rampant in many areas of the world and that, in general, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) struggled to get donor money utilized without red tape and corruption. What I didn’t know was that many projects, after completion, would go abandoned and unused due to broken parts that could not be replaced or because the project was not integrated into the community. Thus, they were left unsupported by maintenance and would eventually fail.

Water For People defines success differently than most NGOs. Instead of counting the number of hand pumps installed or toilets donated, the organization defines success by reaching full coverage and providing sustainable access to water and sanitation for entire geographically defined areas. They support these regions by seeing that each community has the support of its local sectors (governmental, non-governmental, and private) and social infrastructure so that, together, they can maintain their systems forever. Water For People calls this approach “Everyone, Forever” and there is already evidence of this radically dif-

The group of AWWA Water For People committee members, major WFP donors, and social entrepreneurs that went to Bolivia with Connections Tour.

A water tap at a Water For People community has achieved 100 percent coverage for potable water.
different method being adopted by others in the international development sector.

In Bolivia, the nature of my trip was different than it had been in Rwanda. Instead of collecting data in areas that had yet to see the support of Water For People, this trip was designed to provide a first-hand account of its work, from the planning and ribbon-cutting phase, to many, many years beyond. From the moment we landed and the plane locked and poverty stricken like Rwanda, but and myriad indigenous cultures. It is land- locked and poverty stricken like Rwanda, but that is where the similarities end. In Rwanda, I was met with a tutu of children that surrounded me in every village I visited. It was a place where adults would touch my light hair with curiosity.

In Bolivia, the tradition and conservativeness of its people permeated every interaction and they seemed to exude a pride in themselves and their ancient heritage. While more reserved and more formal in nature, these interactions seemed to suggest a permanence and appreciation of cultural identity. It seemed to me that the Rwandan culture was drawing its strength from looking to the bright future that it could create for itself, while the strength of the Bolivians appeared to come from the solidarity of a long cultural past.

In exploring the various areas where Water For People has a presence, what struck me the most was the fact that each solution was a result of each community’s ownership and decision-making. These communities, with Water For People’s help, not only designed wastewater treatment systems that suited their needs and established water distribution (including metering), but they also planned and executed maintenance fees and hygiene programs. The technologies ranged from anaerobic digestion and filtration to composting toilets, but the common denominator was the community-based development that came from the will of the people that live there. Operators of the systems offered a type of barrel-chested pride from having been consulted in the process, and it was common for homeowners to rise out of apparent introversion in order to showcase the bathrooms that they had constructed themselves.

I recently read in Water For People’s annual report that the organization has learned, through its “Everyone, Forever” implementation, that the ingenuity and dedication of the people living in these communities are far more powerful than the hardware that is installed. It is the investment in people that creates lasting and positive change, and is the true impact of Water For People’s work in Bolivia.

I would like to thank Water For People Bolivia, Water For People in Denver, and the Florida Section of AWWA for an amazing trip and the opportunity to witness the sustainability stronghold that is exemplified by the Water For People program.

I would like to thank Jennifer for sharing her experience with us. What makes Water For People so successful is its dedication, passion, enthusiasm, and the opportunity it gives people for a better quality of life.

Water Forum

I want to remind everyone that the Water Forum will be occurring on September 6 at the Renaissance Sea World Resort. The Florida Section, along with Associated Industries of Florida (AIF), will be hosting this year’s event. The scheduled participants and topics include:

- Rep. Steve Perman: Agriculture Lands for Water Storage—Where to Go From Here?
- Rep. Steve Crisafulli: Water Issues for the 2013 Legislative Session
- Herschel Vinyard, secretary of Florida Department of Environmental Protection [FDEP]: Budget and the New Look of Water Management Districts
- Drew Bartlet, director, FDEP: Update on Numeric Nutrient Criteria
- David Childs, attorney, Hopping Green & Sams: Legal Update

The cost of the forum is $50, which includes lunch. For additional information, please visit www.flwaterforum.com

AWWA, WEF Explore Collaboration

In 2011, the governing boards for American Water Works Association (AWWA) and the Water Environmental Federation (WEF) approved a joint resolution that encourages collaboration among our members and greater coordination of programs and services.

Both AWWA and WEF remain committed to the spirit of the 2011 resolution and the organizations have signed an agreement of intent that establishes an exploratory committee to examine potential models for enhanced collaboration and partnership to better serve our members. The committee is comprised of leaders from the two organizations and will examine potential service models ranging from efficiencies in some combined business practices and member services to full integration of the two groups.

AWWA and WEF will continue to work together to best serve our members and the broader water industry and I will keep you apprised as the exploration of enhanced partnership continues.