

Rotary Club teams up with Water First for fundraiser helping Indigenous communities

By Rob Paul

The thought of not having easy access to drinking water is not something many Ontarians have to consider. It is, however, a problem for many Indigenous communities in Ontario.

In Ontario, 40 per cent of Indigenous communities have to boil their water to make it safe, and that didn't sit right with the Rotary Club of Bolton.

After learning about Water First and the programs they offer, the Rotary Club wanted to get involved.

The Rotary Club of Bolton, in collaboration with Water First, will be running a matching fundraiser up to \$4,000 that will lead any community donation to being quadrupled. The funds will be directed to Water First's Drinking Water Internship, a 15-month paid position that hires and trains young Indigenous adults for careers as water operators.

Water First was founded in 2009 to bring drinking water resources to rural schools in Uganda.

In 2012 the organization began working with Indigenous communities in Canada to provide training on operations and maintenance of water system. In 2016, they dedicated the organization to working exclusively with Indigenous communities.

Rotary's involvement began when Club Service Director David Kostynyk brought in a guest speaker from Water First.

'My job with the Club is to bring in potential guest speakers on things that will interest our members,' he said. 'We bring them in to discuss things at our business meetings and we had Dianne Dance come in. She came in and talked to us about this program and we said, 'Okay, well why don't we earmark \$4,000 for this program?' Then we thought we could go to the community to get \$4,000 in donations.

'So basically, if someone donates \$100, we will turn around and match it so now it's \$200. Then through Rotary International, there's an international grant that will once again double the money. So, a \$100 donation turns into \$400. This then goes towards the Water First program to educate an Indigenous person on how to actually operate the facility.'

Kostynyk looked at the situation and couldn't fathom that the problem isn't the tools being unavailable for Indigenous communities to have access to clean water, but it's the lack of proper training for them to operate water treatment facilities.

The intern program being run by Water First not only teaches a member of an Indigenous community in need of clean water how to operate treatment facilities, but it gives them a stake in the program too.

'Through the program at Water First—an NGO based out of Creemore—they've developed an intern program where the Indigenous community members select someone and they basically go to school to become a water treatment facilitator,' Kostynyk said. 'The good thing is, it's not free for them. It's basically 66 per cent organizationally funded and 33 per cent of the money for the training comes from the Indigenous community?so they actually have a buy-in.'

The Rotary Club of Bolton unanimously agreed that this would be the perfect fundraiser to run to lend a helping hand to those in need.

'It was kind of a no-brainer,' said Kostynyk. 'Imagine going to your tap and wanting to get a drink of water, putting it into a pot and now you've got to boil it for 10 minutes, and it's 40 per cent of all the Indigenous communities in Ontario that have to deal with this.

It's crazy. It's appalling. If it were one or two per cent or even 10 per cent then okay, but it's 40 per cent.?

Working with Water First on this fundraiser made a lot of sense for the Rotary Club of Bolton who saw it not only as a chance to help those in need, but an opportunity to raise awareness of the struggles that Indigenous communities still deal with today.

?It also creates jobs for the people there,? said Kostynyk. ?That will be a paid position when the person graduates from the internship.?

To donate to the Rotary Club of Bolton's Water First fundraiser, visit boltonrotary.ca.