

All this man wants is a glass of clean water

When Matt Damon's H2O Africa
went looking for a partner,
the search ended when it
found Gary White.
And that's when the real work began.

By Elisa Birnbaum

It would be hard to find a more sobering image of the dangers of improper water and sanitation practices than the one coming out of Haiti today. By the end of 2010, well over 1,000 deaths and nearly 20,000 hospitalizations were reported due to cholera's stranglehold. An indirect consequence of the 2010 earthquake, the water-borne disease is likely to infect tens of thousands of people in the country over the next few years, a fact made all the more frustrating because it is completely preventable.

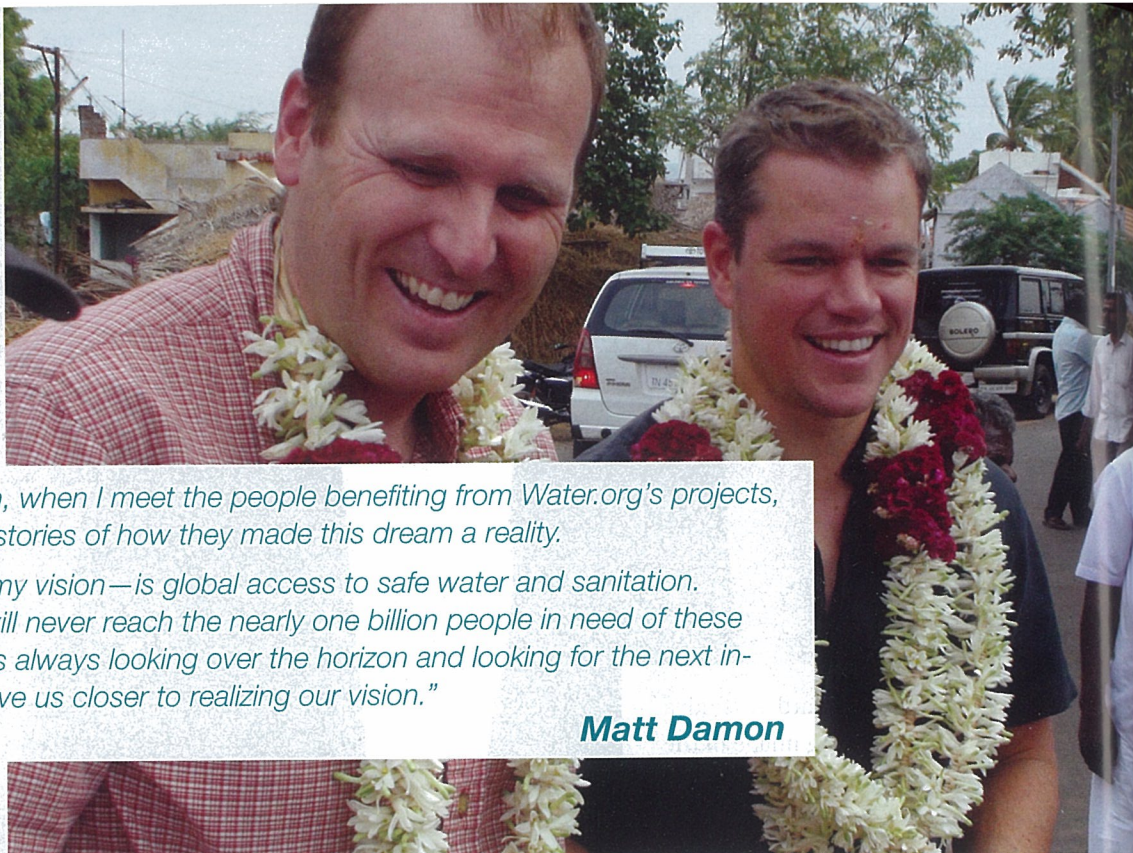
That devastating picture is exactly what Gary White is trying to avoid. Co-founder and executive director of Water.org, a nonprofit organization that creates innovative solutions to combat the water crisis in hundreds of communities across Africa, South Asia, and Central America, White is on a mission—undeterred.

Sanitation. Toilets. Diarrhea. Certainly not the most glamorous words to live by, but they provide the motivational fodder for a man who's been working in this arena for a long, long

Photo by René Pérez

PROFILE Gary White

White and Damon visit a water project in India.
Photo courtesy of Water.org



"Over and over again, when I meet the people benefiting from Water.org's projects, I'm inspired by their stories of how they made this dream a reality."

Water.org's vision—my vision—is global access to safe water and sanitation. Philanthropy alone will never reach the nearly one billion people in need of these services. Water.org is always looking over the horizon and looking for the next innovation that will move us closer to realizing our vision."

Matt Damon

time. "It's all I've ever done," remarks the husband and father

of two during a recent phone call from a location that's become his second home: the airport. On a stopover from a trip to Washington (more on that later), he spoke openly about a topic that's drawn him in since the 1980s, when he was an undergrad studying civil engineering. "I was always looking for a way to blend engineering with social justice," he says.

His search began to consolidate while on a trip to the slums of Guatemala City. Witnessing sewage swelling in the streets and people collecting water from visibly contaminated barrels, the deplorable conditions were a real eye-opener. It didn't take the engineering student long to realize he was staring at a huge global crisis, a mind-blowing issue, one quickly growing in intensity and impact. It took him even less time to decide that he'd found his project.

A look at the stats reveals how much the issue needed White: Each year, over a billion people lack access to water; 2.5 billion people live without proper sanitation; 3.6 million people die each year from water-related disease; and nearly one in five child deaths—approximately 1.5 million—are due to diarrhea. That means diarrhea kills more young children than AIDS, malaria, and measles combined.

White moved to New York and got a job with Catholic Relief Services assisting its water and sanitation programs in Latin America. He was soon struck by the dearth of information on the world's top health problem. Worse still, White noticed that at least half the water projects de-

veloped to "fix" the issue were failing. "We had this huge problem and inadequate solutions," recalls White. "That's when I decided to do something about it."

And so began WaterPartners. It was 1990, long before water was a trending topic—long before anyone even knew what a trending topic was. Having established itself as a force to be reckoned with when it came to tackling the global water crisis, in 2009 WaterPartners merged with H2O Africa—co-founded by actor Matt Damon—to become Water.org, giving the organization an added boost. As White explains, "What we had done with WaterPartners was develop rigorous, downstream work, meaning all the work that happens in the developing countries on the ground." To wit: The organization applies stringent criteria as part of an intense vetting process before any funds are deployed to local organizations.

H2O Africa, White continues, was known for its effective work upstream: awareness raising, fundraising, PR, media, and related activities. Looking for projects to fund, H2O initially threw some support behind WaterPartners. "They saw the upstream, downstream symmetry," explains White. Eventually, WaterPartners became the exclusive grantee, prompting its chief to wonder whether a better plan would be working in unison, as one powerful, singular solution to the water issue.

With "upstream" savvy, Damon and White announced their auspicious merger at a similarly auspicious event: the opening plenary of the Clinton Global Initiative. It was also where they detailed the new organization's focus on Haiti.

"I was just there a few weeks ago," relates White of a trip he found disturbing. That people are still living in tents tells only half the story of a place profoundly shackled. Though Water.org is not working in an area directly affected by the earthquake, the country represents one of the most challenging programs to raise funds for, says White.

Dedicated to long-term solutions, Water.org is competing with an earthquake's short-term attraction, one more attuned to raising money for emergency relief operations; by the time Water.org came along, donor fatigue had set in. Undaunted, White is pressing on. "Our goal is to reach 50,000 people with water and sanitation in a three-year period," he says. A little over a year into it, they're making progress, but a lot more will be needed to achieve the goal. "I think it'll happen," says the eternal optimist. For help, Water.org is looking online, partnering with Zynga, the popular social games company that created Facebook's popular FarmVille game. As part of a FishVille promotion that ran earlier this year, players could buy a Haitian fish, with 50 percent of the money going toward Water.org's projects in the country.

White hopes to do more of that kind of thing, leveraging the absurd yet delightful potential of social media, though he knows challenges remain. Thankfully, he's got other forms of leverage on his side, too. For one, there's that Damon guy. Let's be honest, stars carry unparalleled weight in a celebrity-crazed world. "I think it [partnering with a celebrity] is increasingly helping," White says. But both Damon and White are insistent on forgoing the traditional celebrity approach whereby a star lends his polished mug to a one-dimensional endorsement. Intimately involved in Water.org, Damon is well versed in its programming and vision. "He could probably do this interview himself in terms of program impact and what's happening," states White.

Damon has also been instrumental in helping Water.org play a more prominent role in advocacy. "We want to be able to draw more attention to the issue itself, not only to raise more money for Water.org," White explains. And thanks to the merger, he says, "we have a combination of Matt being able to draw attention to the issue [but we also have] a 20-year track record of success." The newfound focus on public policy and advocacy helps explain White's recent trip to Washington, D.C., where he's been working to get the Water for the World Act—already passed by the Senate—cleared by the House. "If we get it passed, it means the U.S. is committed to reaching 100 million people with

safe water and sanitation over the next five years," he says with exuberance. "It would be a big step up from what's happening now."

Another powerful asset at White's disposal is his prestigious Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship, a \$765,000 honor that recognizes individuals pursuing sustainable approaches to resolving the world's most urgent social issues. "It has been a tremendous thing for us," says White. Not only does the prize allow him to join a supportive network of fellow social entrepreneurs, it also carries an unmatched stamp of legitimacy. "Skoll puts organizations through an incredible vetting process," he explains. "That can help in getting additional fundraising, especially when institutional donors recognize how valuable that process is."

Of course, when it comes to leverage, nothing holds more weight than success. And the numbers here speak for themselves: To date, Water.org has reached more than 690,000 people through programs and, in 2010 alone, over 238,000 people were supplied with clean water and sanitation. But it's the personal narratives, more than the numbers, that seem to really resonate with White. Take the woman in an Indian slum he and Damon met at a recent inauguration of a Water.org project. She ecstatically hailed the newfound faucet outside her home, for it meant no longer spending two hours in line each day for water. And an elderly woman, thankful for not having to wait until the middle of the night before defecating by the riverbank, praised the shiny toilet that now graced her home.

Water.org's accomplishments may have something to do with its unique approach. Believing that people on the ground know best how to solve their own challenges, the nonprofit works with local partners who help them decide which projects to fund. Sounds logical, but you'd be surprised how seldom the practice is adopted by other well-intentioned organizations. Local partners have proven imperative, ensuring every solution is customized to the specific needs of the community; one size simply doesn't fit all. They also help navigate the varied social, political, and economic issues involved with each project.

What's more, at the heart of Water.org's philosophy is community engagement, working in tandem with the people who will ultimately benefit from water initiatives. As the website explains: "For a project to be truly successful, communities must be viewed and must view themselves as the owners of the project." Communities are involved at every stage of a project—from planning to building, and

from financing to maintenance. To ensure continuous, long-term engagement, local and relatively simple technology is used and participants are educated on the maintenance and repair of their water systems.

But collaboration and community engagement are not the only unique aspects of Water.org's approach. There's also the steadfast pursuit of innovation. "It really is central to what we do," affirms White. Case in point: the introduction of WaterCredit, a microfinance tool that enables impoverished individuals in developing countries—who wouldn't otherwise have access to credit from traditional financial institutions—to take out small loans for water projects (while those in need of full subsidies continue to receive that level of support).

Here's the thing: the typical response to the water crisis today is charity. But there will never be enough charity to meet the demand of nearly a billion people in the world who need safe drinking water. The question is how best to leverage those charitable dollars to effect the greatest impact. Grants should be "applied catalytically rather than just drilling more wells in one-off situations," explains White.

Launched in 2003, WaterCredit is a tool of empowerment, one that allows people to find their own solutions to water needs. Currently offered in Bangladesh, India, Kenya, and Uganda, the initiative helps allay some of the destructive scenarios White witnesses on the ground. "We saw people in slums going to loan sharks, taking loans at 125 percent interest just so they could afford to connect to the public water system—you have to pay an upfront fee of \$75-\$100 just for the right to connect to the system—and build toilets."

Social entrepreneurial by nature, Water.org looks at the newly created markets as both an opportunity and a challenge. "Not only will the money go further in terms of reaching more people per dollar invested, but if you make these programs more demand driven as opposed to supply driven, they are actually more sustainable." There's actually an inverse relationship between the level of subsidy that goes into a project and how sustainable that project is, he adds.

If used properly, hundreds of millions of people could make use of this credit tool to meet their needs, offers White enthusiastically. In fact, after seven short years, it seems the innovative solution is already making inroads. Some impressive stats as of November 2010 include: more than 236,000 people have benefited from WaterCredit;

35,110 loans have been given to borrowers; and loan repayment is over 97 percent. As a result of these new markets, India's commercial banks are now loaning money for these programs. "We've shown you can actually take commercial capital and apply it to this," says White. "If you can do that, it becomes inherently scalable."

The microfinance initiative is receiving a lot of support. The Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and PepsiCo Foundation, for example, are already on board. And the Toronto-based MasterCard Foundation, dedicated to promoting microfinance and youth education, recently awarded WaterPartners a \$3.6 million grant to expand WaterCredit into East Africa.

Water.org is looking at other innovative solutions, too. "Innovation is our sweet spot," explains White. "We're attracting a lot more donors who see us as an innovation incubator in this area." Testing new ideas and scaling them up is the only way you're going to solve this problem, he adds. "It's about doing more with less." Now that's a concept White can get behind. **LM**

White at a water project in Ethiopia.
Photo courtesy of Water.org

