

DIFFERENCE MAKERS

Providing hope in a can

Gregory Stromberg started CannedWater4kids nonprofit to make sure children worldwide have access to safe drinking water

By Cathy Kozlowitz
Now News Group

While Gregory Stromberg was an executive in the general can packaging industry, he never forgot the feeling he had when he learned thousands of children worldwide were dying every day because of a lack of clean drinking water.

His journey started in 2007 when he was at The Canmaker Summit, a global meeting to discuss issues and trends in the can-producing industry. He learned if a can is not packaged properly, the water can get contaminated and spoil, which can kill young children.

There are also other dangers in water in developing countries, such as toxins, Stromberg learned.

"Children are dying," he emphasized. He then decided to take on the world's water problems himself.

The following year, he started the nonprofit organization CannedWater4Kids to "ensure all children have access to safe drinking water," said Stromberg, a longtime Sussex resident.

Now, nearly 15 years later, Stromberg, through his nonprofit, has sent 3.5 million bottles and cans, free of charge, to disaster relief situations from the water products the organization created in 2008. Additionally, the nonprofit has financially supported many clean water initiatives, purification systems and educated others on the issues of clean water.

Now, in his retirement - after working more than 40 years in the general can packaging industry - Stromberg plans to supply more water, do more training and work on more projects to provide clean water.

"Kids are our future. Everything breaks down if they are not healthy," he explained.

Making pure bottled and canned water

The water canned by CannedWater4Kids undergoes the most rigorous testing to ensure it is clean, Stromberg said.

Ball Corp., an aluminum packaging company for beverages, makes the cans in Colorado. They are then shipped to WIS-Pak in Norfolk, Nebraska, where they are filled. They are then sent to the company headquarters in Watertown, where they are stored.

He sells the cans and bottles of water online; 95% of the money collected helps support, fund and deliver sustainable clean drinking water programs that save children worldwide through CannedWater4Kids.

Besides delivering, for free, these canned and bottled water in emergency situations, the proceeds from water help with education, clean water initiatives and funding other projects.

Helping in disaster situations

When Stromberg bears news about a disaster situation relating to unsafe drinking water, his typical response is, "We just have to help."

This was true in February 2021 when Texas had a week of freezing temperatures with more than 10 inches of snow and ice. Because of cracked pipes, nearly half of the people in Texas faced boil-water advisories and a scarcity of safe drinking water.

Under Stromberg's direction, CannedWater4Kids delivered more than 100,000 16-ounce bottles of water to the area.

Stromberg also partnered with American Airlines when Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in September 2017. More than half the population was left without clean water. CannedWater4Kids provided 29,000 pounds of safe, canned drinking water.

He provided more than 170,000 cans of water



Gregory Stromberg started the nonprofit CannedWater4Kids. This Sussex-based nonprofit started in 2008 with the mission to ensure all kids have safe drinking water.

to Flint, Michigan, when its water was contaminated with lead and possibly Legionella bacteria.

After Haiti suffered an earthquake in 2010, CannedWater4Kids donated more than 200,000 cans of water. Similarly, it donated more than 100,000 cans of water to Japan in 2011 after earthquakes there.

"If the Red Cross calls, we do not hesitate to help when asked," said Stromberg said. "Water is so important. You can only last three days without it."

Helping people in Milwaukee with lead in their water

Closer to home, Stromberg has helped many people in Milwaukee who have lead in their water. Many of Milwaukee's homes, especially some of the oldest homes, have lead pipes. The lead can flake off into the water the pipes carry, affecting vulnerable children. The city of Milwaukee replaced 982 lead laterals last year. But, there are more than 70,000 that need to be replaced.

CannedWater4Kids delivered free bottles and cans of water to about 30 pregnant women from January to June this year. The goal was to deliver the water to each woman for up to 12 months. It costs about \$100 a month for the water and delivery for each woman.

"CannedWater4Kids are fantastic," said Robert Miranda, who is on the steering committee of Get the Lead Out Coalition. "They provided water to pregnant mothers without collecting anything. The mothers are very appreciative. It takes away the stress and worry of dealing with the water."

"They are just good people," he emphasized. Stromberg said he had to pull back on providing free water to these women because of a lack of funding. He is working on funding so more mothers can be helped.

Building sustainable clean water systems

Marissa Jablonski is the executive director of the Freshwater Collaborative of Wisconsin. When she learned about a program in Guatemala that could help people there get a new water supply system, she knew it would be a great project for the engineering students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

At the time, she was working on her graduate degree at the university.

When a friend told her that CannedWater4Kids supports what she wants to do, Jablonski was stunned.

"What are you talking about? No one supports what we do," she said, noting that it is hard getting funds for other countries and the problem is not as well known.

When she finally got the nerve to call Stromberg and they had a meeting, he immediately wrote a check for \$5,000.

For the last 13 years, the collaborative has raised \$40,000 a year to send 10 students and three mentors to Guatemala.

Although it now has funders and corporate sponsors who help, in what is now called Engineers Without Borders, Jablonski said that Stromberg and CannedWater4Kids have been financial supporters each year.

"The money we give them goes to work on sustainable water purification and literally train the people (of Guatemala) to buy pipes and the supplies to build a (water) purification system; said Stromberg.

Jablonski said that because of Stromberg's help, 1,500 homes in Guatemala have a system to provide them with clean water.

Providing clean water In Africa

When Moe Mukilbi went to Kenya four years ago, he saw women and children die in Lake Victoria as crocodiles killed them when they tried to get to the water.

Additionally, the water from the lake was extremely toxic, he said.

"I saw people die every day," said Mukilbi, president and co-owner of Stonehouse Water Technologies at the Global Water Center in Milwaukee. "I said, 'enough is enough.'"

Through mutual connections, Mukilbi got connected with Stromberg and CannedWater4Kids, which donated to install a water purification system in one of the schools, Point of Grace Academy, in rural Kisumu. For the last four years, the system has delivered more than 10,000 gallons of clean water each day for cooking and drinking.

The real benefit is that 900 people are saved from going in the lake; said Mukilbi. There are also 2,500 people from the neighboring villages who now have access to the water.

CannedWater4Kids also has funded and completed a clean water project in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia in Central Africa. Because of that project, 400,000 people in that area, most of them children, now have access to clean water. The freshwater allows for good and sustainable agriculture, food and energy production, according to the CannedWater4Kids website.

"Their water can be easily contaminated, so we do education on hand washing and sanitation," Stromberg added.

CannedWater4Kids has funded and delivered more than 30 sustainable wells and water filtration projects in Africa.

Stromberg said he is always planning more projects and initiatives for the nonprofit he started in 2008.

"I want to leave a legacy of helping those in need," said Stromberg.

He said for the world to achieve clean water, it helps if everyone does a little bit.

How to help

To donate to CannedWater4kids, visit www.cannedwater4kids.org/donate-to-cannedwater4kids
To buy CW4K canned water, visit www.cannedwater4kids.org/buy-cw4k-water