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Cannistraro helps build Haitian teaching hospital

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It started with the earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010. The death toll was upwards of 250,000. Another 300,000 were injured, and 1.5 million people were displaced. The earthquake created between \$7.8 billion to \$8.5 billion in damage. Tracy Cannistraro saw the devastation and the urgent need and asked her husband, “What could we do?”

Not one to shy away from a challenge, John Cannistraro, Jr. responded by helping to build a teaching hospital for the Haitian Ministry of Health supported by Partners in Health or as they are locally known, Zanmi Lasante. As the president of Cannistraro, a GBPCA member and one of the country’s largest mechanical contractors, he marshaled resources and constructed 300 medical gas headwall units at the company’s prefabrication plant and leveraged over \$600K worth of materials as well as hundreds of volunteer hours from mechanical contractors. He shipped the units in containers to Port-au-Prince and sent a couple of Local 12 plumbers down there to train Haitian mechanics and oversee the installation.

“The hospital was built,” said Cannistraro. “But it came with a lifetime warranty for Haiti.” With that commitment, he next helped build a new surgical center and medical laboratory in the southern part of the island nation.

While involved with the projects, Cannistraro connected with Partners in Health. In discussions with officers of the non-governmental organization, which assists in providing healthcare for people in Haiti and 9 impoverished countries, he learned that cholera and other water-borne diseases that are rampant in Haiti are caused by lack of household sanitation. Young children are especially vulnerable. In most areas, there is no running water nor any sewage systems. As many as 90% of those living in rural areas defecate in the open as there are no improved sources for proper disposal of feces. Cannistraro saw this as another challenge.

“John Cannistraro is one of our biggest supporters,” said Elizabeth Campa, senior health and policy advisor for Zanmi Lasante, Partners in Health’s sister organization in Haiti. For about a year the two have been working together on an open pit cover that the contractor has designed with a “think tank” of Cannistraro engineers and other employees.

Understanding that the cover would have to be portable, lightweight, stackable, durable, easy to clean, and inexpensive to produce and distribute, the team got to work. The prototype concept that they developed is essentially a covered bucket on top of a nine-foot, plastic-covered pit. Cannistraro says that it should serve an average household about ten years.

Earlier this year, Campa and Cannistraro presented a mock-up of the unit made on a 3-D printer to members of the Haitian government, UNICEF, and the World Bank. The panel approved the concept and gave the green light to proceed with a field test.

A full-scale model of the open pit cover was on display at a fundraising event in the spring that coincided with World Plumbing Day. It was held at The Plumbing Museum, which is located on the Cannistraro campus and operated in large part by the company. The \$60,000 that was generated at the event will be used to build working pit covers and test them in a dozen homesteads before the end of this year. "We're going to make this happen," Cannistraro says. By testing first, this would allow for individuals to gain interest and receive the final approval of the government of Haiti towards marketing the product to the greater public.

Once the concept is proven viable, Campa envisions a long term goal of having sanitation markets throughout the country becoming a reality. People could buy the pit covers for a reasonable cost. "It might take five or ten years, but that's our goal," she says. It's critical to have the buy-in of the Haitian government, with which the Partners in Health/Zanmi Lasante has been closely working for 30 years.

Addressing the donors who had come to support the Haiti project, Cannistraro talked about the impact that the pit covers could have on containing disease and preventing deaths. "I need help," he said. "What's a better investment? It's a life. It's a soul."

The plumbing industry professional also used an apt water-based metaphor. He repeated an adage that his wife, who instigated the project, said about their efforts to help the Haitian people: "If you put a pebble in the water, it makes a ripple, then a wave, and the next thing you know it's a tidal wave."

While \$60K will provide support in the early stages of developing a model and sending to Haiti for testing, additional funds are needed for growing the start-up project to cover a larger area of the population and appropriately research this process by experts on the ground. 100% of funds donated to this project will go directly towards the growing of this model to scale.

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