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City GM off to the Congo

AUTHOR: LAURIE WATT, STAFF

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BARRIE - A senior Barrie staffer is starting the New Year by spending two weeks of holidays teaching Third World health professionals about clean water.

Richard Forward, general manager of infrastructure, development and culture, leaves Friday for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly known as Zaire. A Third World country, the Congo is home to 62 million people, two-thirds of whom suffer from malnutrition. Enduring one of the worst humanitarian crises despite its civil war ending in 2003, the Congo has had more than 5 million of its people die, not just due to the conflicts over the African heartland country's mineral resources but due to disease and hunger, says GlobalMedic. Cholera outbreaks continue to kill.



STAN HOWE PHOTO

Richard Forward, the city's general manager of infrastructure, development and culture, is travelling to the Congo to help install water filters. Forward will be "teaching the teacher" to help each household create and maintain its own clean-water supply.

GlobalMedic has donated water-purification tablets to communities there to help reduce the spread of water-borne disease – but the bio-sand filter is its first foray into helping families solve the problem in the long-term.

"It's quite exciting. I've been a volunteer with a group, GlobalMedic, and they're primarily firefighters, paramedics and police who do disaster relief. They travel to Third World countries and set hospitals and provide drinking water and search and rescue. "They're branching out into post-disaster work, where they go in and create low-cost bio-sand filters," said Forward, who holds his Bachelor of Science in engineering.

The bio-sand filter is a simple technology, developed at the University of Calgary. It enables families to purify their own drinking water, and therefore reduce the incidence of water-borne disease.

"The top layer is a bio-layer which consumes bacteria and the filter can be quite effective in treating water they may have gotten out of a river or a shallow dug well," said Forward, whose job also includes responsibility for meeting provincial drinking water standards.

"Once you teach the skills to a family, they can maintain them," he added.

As GlobalMedic's lead water engineer, Forward is going on the mission to support the United Methodist Committee on Relief, a Christian agency that focuses on emergency response and health issues, including HIV/AIDS, Malaria, community-based primary care, and equipping families with health kits,

Working with doctors and health professionals, Forward will be "teaching the teacher" to help each household create and maintain its own clean-water supply. The bio-sand filters can last up to 10 years.

After Forward returns home on Jan. 20, an implementation team will go to the Congo, and help families build their own filters.

"Health care workers will ensure they're being used properly, which will decrease diarrhea and water-borne disease. They're very effective," said Forward.

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