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'Water for Waslala' Project Funds Construction of Water Systems in Nicaragua

By Denis Grasska

SAN DIEGO — A job with one of the nation's top accounting firms was waiting for Justin Knabb upon his graduation last May from Villanova University.

But the 23-year-old deferred on the offer, choosing instead to pledge one year of service to the Augustinian Volunteers, a volunteer program affiliated with the Augustinian Order. In the process, he traded a \$50,000 starting salary for a weekly stipend of \$25.

As West Coast Director of the program's "Water for Waslala" project, one of Knabb's main responsibilities is opening the eyes and hearts of local elementary school, high school and college students to the plight of the approximately 45,000 residents of the impoverished region of Waslala, Nicaragua.

The "Water for Waslala" project aims to fund construction and renovation of water systems for some 85 rural communities in the municipality of Waslala,

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COURTESY WATER FOR WASLALA

WATER FOR WASLALA: A Waslalan boy is shown bathing in the stream that provides his village's drinking water. Deadly water-borne illnesses are caused by soapy water, pesticides, animal feces, bacteria and other pollutants.

where contaminated water supplies have led to illness and even death.

"My passion has definitely been refocused onto this work for peace and justice," Knabb said. "This work has transformed my outlook on life and my role in the world."

Knabb has already made presentations at St. Patrick School in San Diego, St. Augustine High School, the Academy of Our Lady of Peace and the University of San Diego. Over the next few months, he also plans to visit Cathedral Catholic High School, Francis Parker High School and various schools in Orange County.

In his presentations, Knabb begins by describing his own experience in Waslala, which he first visited last May and where he will return in June. He also describes a typical day in Waslala, screens clips from a documentary on the municipality, and explains how the water systems work and how the students can contribute to the project's success.

"I want to plant a seed in the students to get them thinking about their roles as Christian citizens in a global-

ized world, a world where they can make a difference," Knabb said. "We can transform the lives of these people, who are living on less than a dollar a day, providing them with their basic human needs."

As a member of the "Water for Waslala" board of directors, which is comprised solely of young adults under the age of 30, Knabb has been inspired by the genuine interest and positive response of his youthful audiences.

But students often are still curious why Knabb and his friends have been so singularly focused on one issue — water purity — and one location — the little-known municipality of Waslala. Knabb has been ready with the answers.

While Waslalans are affected by several problems, he said, water is "such a basic human need" that addressing that one issue facilitates their advancement to "the next rung on the ladder to development."

He explains that the project also empowers Waslalans by allowing them to build the water systems themselves, under the supervision of a Waslalan

whose education at a water engineering school is being financed by the "Water for Waslala" project.

According to Knabb, several of the schools in 2006 will launch their own fundraising efforts in support of the project's mission. Instrumental to the project's success so far have been private donations, which have been fueled both through letter-writing campaigns and the generosity of those inspired by his description of the project.

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The "Water for Waslala" project was the brainchild of Villanova University alumnus Matthew Nespoli, who spent a week in Waslala during one of the university's alternative spring break

opportunities. The local Catholic parish, which by the late 1990s had overseen construction of water systems for 30 of Waslala's rural communities, told Nespoli about the urgency of the water issue.

The "Water for Waslala" project will perfect those 30 systems and build new systems for the more than 50 communities currently without access to pure water. Since the project began last year, new systems have already been built in four communities; if current fundraising efforts are successful, another 10 might be built this year. According to Knabb, a minimum of \$250,000 is needed to build all 50 new systems.

"It's almost like the forgotten land, the forgotten people," Knabb said of Waslala, admitting that he had never heard of it before his involvement with the project. "Not many other people have ever heard of Waslala either. It's just exciting for us to start to put this place on the map."

For more information or to support "Water for Waslala," visit www.waterforwaslala.org or call (610) 724-5181.

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