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ALUMNI VIEW

Human Right to Water

By George McGraw



George McGraw, top left, on location with his DIGDEEP organization.

I can trace my career – my life’s work – to a single, epic moment of laziness in college. Today I run DIGDEEP, a human rights organization working to empower communities without access to clean water. But in 2009 I was still a student at Loyola University Chicago, taking a capstone course in human rights for a degree in political science.

My professor – a rather brilliant (if formidable) Romanian diplomat – assigned each of us a semester-long project: take any right from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and trace its history. The first assignment was a research proposal, and I wrote mine on the human right to water.

I didn’t realize at the time that the human right to water wasn’t among those rights mentioned by the Universal Declaration. (I hadn’t bothered to read it.) Nor did I realize that the very concept of a “human right” to water was a subject of considerable debate.

I like to think my Romanian professor was channeling *magis* (what more can we do for God?) when he assigned me a semester-long “deep dive” into the controversy surrounding the right to water. He told me to trace the roots of the right in international law and to propose the shape that such a right might take in the future. It was a ton of work. What more, indeed.

I took that research from Loyola into grad school, where I completed a master’s in international law. My thesis on the human right to water was published by Loyola’s *International Law Review* and quickly became required reading

in human rights programs around the world.

In 2011 I began my own organization, DIGDEEP. Our goal is to make the human right to water real by designing, co-financing, and implementing community-based water projects that put control over water resources back into the hands of communities. In 2011 the idea was both radical and necessary; more than 70% of water projects were failing within the first year, because they failed to empower the people benefiting from them.

Today DIGDEEP operates in South Sudan, Uganda and Cameroon. In 2013, we became the only global water organization to also work domestically, where 1.7 million Americans still don’t have access to a safe source of running water at home. Our work has been covered by CBS, *The New York Times*, VICE, and many others. The journey has been a tough and rewarding one.

Starting a global nonprofit in the middle of an economic downturn would not have been possible without that Jesuit spirit of adventure and openness that calls each of us into relationship with the other, especially the poor. Well that, and one generous professor who used my own laziness to teach me a valuable lesson.

George McGraw is an alumnus of Loyola University Chicago and also has a master’s in international law from the United Nations University for Peace in Costa Rica. He has worked extensively in human rights issues and has published in The New York Times, Huffington Post, and elsewhere.