

## BECOMING A WATER AND SANITATION ADVOCATE

*Making a difference, two clean hands at a time*

by Elynn Walter

**W**hat does it mean to be a water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) advocate? An advocate for WASH comes in all shapes and sizes. I have been a “WASH advocate” for years but never knew it.

From 2003 to 2005 I served as a Peace Corps community health educator in small village in Turkmenistan. Like most Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) I experienced diarrhea, giardia and amoebic dysentery. During training, I remember sharing countless stories about poop with my fellow Volunteers. Although these stories always gave us a chuckle, I knew the causes of these diseases and had access to great medical care to treat them. The problem was this treatment wasn't a long-term, sustainable solution. I realized very quickly that treatment was temporary and until I could prevent re-infestation and re-contamination I would continue to get sick.

In an effort to improve my health and that of my host family, I constantly nagged my five-year-old host brother to wash his hands. When he and the family finally did start washing their hands, my health improved, as did the health of the rest of my host family. At the time, I would not have called that advocacy. In retrospect, such a small, simple act led to changes in his behavior and health benefits for the whole family.

We know the facts: every 15 seconds a child dies from water and sanitation related diseases, globally nearly a billion people lack access to safe drinking water and over 2.5 billion lack access to proper sanitation, and water, and sanitation-related diseases account for 80 percent of illnesses in developing countries. These statistics can be overwhelming but we already know the solutions, we just have to put them in place. If this sounds simple,



The author with her host family in Turkmenistan.

it is. As a PCV you do not need to be a water and sanitation or health volunteer to take on these challenges in your communities. As a member of the community, PCVs are often viewed as a resource to help address issues the community thinks impede their ability to improve their lives such as lack of education, lack of employment, health problems and economic instability. Water and sanitation can often be at the root of these challenges. A PCV has the opportunity to make monumental long-term changes if he or she can address specific water and sanitation issues.

When most people think about water and sanitation they think infrastructure. In certain circumstances infrastructure or innovative technologies can be the answer, but there is more to WASH work than wells and toilets. Simple hand-washing with soap can reduce diarrheal disease cases by 45 percent. Any Volunteer can promote hand-washing in their home, at their workplace or with their neighbors and make sustainable, long-term changes for the health and wellbeing of people in the community.

Discouraging defecation in the open is another way to be a WASH advocate. This can be difficult if clean and well-maintained toilets do not exist. So what

is the solution? There are currently many options for sustainable sanitation. One example is the ArborLoo—a simple pit latrine that, when full, is planted with a new tree. This simple innovation helps make our world a little greener by planting new trees and keeping feces off the ground and out of water supplies.

Central to WASH is the reality that there is no silver bullet.

Volunteers, together with national and international NGOs, governments and the members of the community can help find the most locally appropriate and cost effective sustainable solutions.

As a PCV, it is you who can advocate on behalf of the community, on behalf of the school children, on behalf of the farmers, on behalf of the healthcare workers and support them in their efforts to lead more productive and healthier lives. Advocacy can be a simple conversation with a five-year-old host brother or a proposal for a latrine block and hand-washing station at the local school. No matter what the action is, every volunteer has the opportunity to become a WASH promoter through their primary and secondary projects.

Think about this: as a current or former Peace Corps Volunteer, what can I do today to advocate for the billions in the world without safe drinking water, adequate sanitation and hygiene education?

To learn more about the global WASH challenge and the solutions visit [www.WASHinitiative.org](http://www.WASHinitiative.org) or sign up for our newsletter at [news@WASHinitiative.org](mailto:news@WASHinitiative.org).

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