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**ATLANTA**

# Pottery teacher creates water filter for developing nations

## Tracy Hawkins' nonprofit is her own version of Habitat for Humanity

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Tracy Hawkins arrived in a Tanzanian town in East Africa in summer 2005 with a few simple goals.

No. 1 was getting out of her empty Brookhaven house while her kids were away at summer camp. She also wanted to meet people and do something meaningful.

Hawkins' three-week excursion to teach pottery in Tanzania evolved into a fledgling organization that's now bringing clean water to two developing countries, with plans for rapid expansion throughout Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Filter Pure Inc., a nonprofit company Hawkins started last year with a partner in the Dominican Republic, combines centuries-old know-how with modern-day technology. Unglazed clay pots — simple pottery — fired with the right ingredients can trap parasites, E. coli and other bacteria while the clean water drips through pores in the clay.

Last week, Hawkins and her partner debuted their simple solution at an international conference of water purification experts in Atlanta.

It was a long way from that first summer in Tanzania, when the only thing the divorced mother of two understood about the country's water problem was that she had to drink it from bottles.

Now Hawkins' ambition is for Filter Pure to do for clean water what Habitat for Humanity has done for affordable housing.

In Tanzania, where she returns every summer, she first saw families living in huts made of mud, sticks and cow dung, where even in town she had power only 40 percent of the time.

“Without people like us there’s very little hope for people like them,” Hawkins said. “Somebody needs to step in and help them along.”

For Hawkins, 51, Filter Pure is something of a second career.

After earning an industrial engineering degree from Georgia Tech in 1985, she worked nearly 15 years in corporate America as an efficiency expert and project manager at Equifax and IBM.

She left corporate life in 1999, thanks to an inheritance from her grandmother. She spent her time learning pottery and volunteering at the Galloway School in Atlanta, which her children, Trent, 14, and Lea, 12, attend. One of her self-appointed tasks was setting up a computer program to take lunch orders.

Hawkins’ transition from corporate executive to what she calls her true self — more laid-back, creative and spiritual — had begun. A recent nose piercing is one outward sign of change, but the Asheville, N.C., native says she’s also happier about her work.

“I think it’s because I’m giving,” she said.

After the 2005 trip to Africa, Hawkins began working to create a pottery school near the small town of Arusha in northern Tanzania. During her research, she also learned about ceramic filters and their potential to provide water.

When she returned to Tanzania in 2006, she showed the plans to the master potter she was working with, Mesiaki Kimirei, and asked whether it was something the town needed.

Kimirei was adamant, Hawkins said, telling her

” ‘We have to do this.’ I took that to heart.”

What started as an afterthought became Hawkins’ driving motivation.

At a cost of about \$30, a ceramic pot nestled in a 5-gallon plastic bucket can turn contaminated river water into clean drinking water for a family for five years.

It’s a well-tested technique. In the 1800s in London, ceramics were used to fight cholera. More recently, ceramic filters have been used effectively in other developing countries, including Cambodia and Honduras.

Thomas Rooney, one of Filter Pure’s advisers, said developed countries outgrew the technology in the last century by building massive municipal water and sewer systems that pipe water to every home and office.

Ceramic water filters are “not a newfangled, crazy, nutty thing,” said Rooney, former president of an international company that builds water projects.

According to the World Health Organization, more than 1 billion people worldwide do not have access to safe water. Many get their water from a river or a water hole dug into a dry riverbed.

Often, the source is contaminated with bacteria and parasites that cause diarrhea and death. The WHO estimates more than 1.5 million people a year die for lack of clean water.

Daniele Lantagne, co-chairwoman of Disinfection 2009, the international water conference in Atlanta, said Filter Pure is proving that ceramic water filters can be made where they are needed and at a high quality.

At the conference, Filter Pure presented research on its filters conducted by Emory University, Lehigh University and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where Lantagne is an environmental engineer.

Lantagne said Filter Pure’s contribution goes beyond the two filter factories started in Tanzania and the Dominican Republic.

“They’re also contributing by helping develop production methods that will allow other filter factories to develop that will then reach more people,” she said.

Hawkins and her Filter Pure partner, Lisa Ballantine, are well-matched. Ballantine, a 41-year-old mother of four, has a background in theater. She’s the outgoing, public face for the organization.

Hawkins is the business administrator, the technical writer and behind-the-scenes organizer.

But their passion comes from the same place, Ballantine said.

“Tracy’s Jewish and I’m a Christian, but we come to it as an expression of faith. We’re expressing our faith in God, that God’s called us to do these things for humanity,” Ballantine said. “For a woman [Hawkins] to go and volunteer her time and her money and have no return, that is a beautiful thing.”

The factory Ballantine started in the Dominican Republic in 2006 has already produced and distributed 11,000 filters. The one Hawkins built in Tanzania just started producing filters that became available for sale last week.


Hawkins said she strongly believes she’s found her life’s mission, thanks in large part to the money left by her grandmother.

“When she’s looking down on me from afar, I hope she’s saying: ‘That’s why I wanted you to have this. I knew you would do good works.’ “

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