

Ship Report

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Mercy Ships project brings wells, latrines to Liberian communities

Before the well in Vincent Town was complete, residents crossed the highway to access drinking water. A child died when a car struck him crossing the road. Janet Richardson, a student in a Mercy Ships water and sanitation class, asked Mercy Ships for a well in her community. The well in Vincent Town, which was finished May 11, provides water for 350 residents in Vincent Town, including Richardson and her two children. Richardson said a neighboring village that's well has dried up will also use the well.

"I am very happy because I will not go across again to get water," Richardson said. "I am also happy (that) because of me development has come to my town. I thank God."

Drinking water and basic sanitation might be deemed luxuries in post-war Liberia, luxuries beyond the reach of many. During the 2005 field service, Mercy Ships CDS taught 22 students a course on water and sanitation. Eight of those students now work under the supervision of Lafe Wood, Mercy Ships director of water and sanitation projects, to dig wells and latrines.

The students work alongside men from the communities receiving the wells and latrines, shoveling sand, digging pits and moving rocks. A Liberian coordinator, Sylvester Sahr, has been hired by the ship to assist. Twenty-two wells will have been completed between the two

Liberia field services by the time the *Anastasis* leaves at the end of the month. These wells impact 3,500 people in 18 villages, in addition to an orphanage and an old folks home.

Wood estimates that over 100 latrines have been dug during the 2005-2006 field service, impacting 1100 people in thirteen villages.

The wells provide safe drinking water for their communities, and latrines secure proper sanitation. In 2004, according to UNICEF, Liberia had only 727 functional hand pumps in the entire country, and 38 percent of the population had no access to clean water; only about 26 percent of the population had access to proper sanitation facilities. Sahr said as wells are finished, people notice fewer cases of cholera.

"Life has improved, actually... whenever a well is done, people celebrate. After some time we don't see those cases," Sahr said.



Wells are dug by hand as opposed to drilling, because drilled wells require casings not readily available in Liberia. If problems arise, casings must be pulled out if repairs become necessary. Additionally, drilled wells are only about six inches wide, which hinders visibility making repairs a challenge. Hand dug wells, though more labor intensive, are about three feet wide, meaning problems can be seen. Repairs can be done with resources available within Liberia. Three weeks work produces a functional well, deep enough to produce water during the dry season. The cost of a digging a well is about the same as a round trip airfare to Africa—\$2000

US. A latrine costs about \$35 US, less than the cost of dinner and a movie for two, and takes three days to complete.

The Mercy Ships project is mapped out so that villages take ownership, with supplies given based on completion of each step. For latrines, students learned how to make cement slabs. In order to get the cement, the pit must be dug first. Then the materials for the slab are given, followed by zinc for the roof. When a latrine is completed, a bag of cement is rewarded.



Association of Evangelicals of Liberia led Wood to Gbonjeimah, which though only six kilometers from the main highway, is remote due to road conditions. During the rainy season, the road sits under five feet of water. Gbonjeimah villagers currently trek down the muddy road barely wide enough for a vehicle to pass through when they need clean water. Before neighboring Saah Town had a well that produced safe water, Gbonjeimah residents hiked to a nearby pool of standing water, nothing more than a murky hole in the ground, complete with its own supply of aquatic life, according to Varney Grey, who heads up his village's latrine project. In a few weeks, though, residents of Gbonjeimah will have their own well to draw water from, in addition to seven latrines.

This is the second well dug in Gbonjeimah. As the first well neared completion, workers struck a large rock after digging 40 feet. They had barely struck water and could go no farther. They would have to start over again. Other difficulties arise when a well doesn't produce water after digging 15 to 18 feet. Workers begin to feel discouraged. Starting over in Gbonjeimah was difficult.

The exciting part in this process, Sahr said, is *"in villages when we start digging from earth (and) hit water."* Then everyone gets excited. *"They realize, 'we're going to have a well soon,' and that encourages them to work."*

Hitting rock had an opposite and adverse effect.

"It's hard to say, 'sorry, you have to do another one,'" Sahr said.

In the end Saah Town residents celebrated the failed effort. It provided them with a well unusable for drinking; however, it is a second water source. They use it for washing and household tasks. They feel blessed.

When a well project is completed, a ceremony is held. Wood said he looks forward to the ceremony, which looks different for each village. Sometimes a large crowd turns up; sometimes it's only a handful. Regardless, a celebration is in order.

"I like seeing people happy—sometimes they dance and sing. It varies from village to village. Sometimes they have an all day dance party. Every village has some kind of ceremony," Wood said.

It's a worthwhile celebration. Access to clean water provides the possibility of a better life. Often after a well is complete, the people cannot believe their former water sources.



Sahr said, *"The part I like about it is we all work. When we get to a place where the well is finished, they are blessed by it. It puts joy in my heart. It feels great to be a part of what God is doing, and to bring hope."*