

# Rancho Santa Fe REVIEW

## **Access to clean drinking water, one impoverished community at a time, is the passion of local entrepreneurs**

*By Lee Schoenbart*

Imagine walking two miles for a bottle of dirty drinking water – just to have water. That's a sad fact for more than a billion people on the planet. Fortunately, that truth is intolerable to Rancho Santa Fe resident Jeff Church, a hands-on philanthropist, and his socially-conscious family.

Last year Church, along with his brother-in-law, David Perez of Del Mar, and business partner Michael Stone of La Jolla, formed Nika Water Company, producers of Nika Purified Water and its nonprofit entity The Nika Charities. Their goal for Nika: to achieve \$1 million in sales annually so 100 percent of its profits, after taxes and costs, will be directed to potable water projects in the poorest nations.

Almost one year later, Nika team members, along with San Diego-based Project Concern International, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), recently traveled to Nicaragua to bring clean water to more than 700 people, 100 homes, two schools and two health clinics of a local village outside the city of Jinotega for the first time. The engineering feat involved piping water out of the upper elevations of a 3,000-foot mountainside from previously inaccessible aquifers within the mountain through a concrete channel and into large reservoir tanks. The water was then distributed through a PVC pipe system into the homes, schools and clinics. Nika, Project Concern and the local community spent approximately \$160,000 on the total project.



The Nika team in front of one of the water tanks (Jeff Church, Isabella Tumini, Nick Kubarych, Dave Musil, Jordan Mellul, Milia Fisher).

"Seventy percent of the people in Nicaragua live on less than a dollar a day, so it's a very impoverished country," Church said. "Jinotega is up in the mountains and pretty remote. We flew to Managua and drove four hours up into the mountains to a village and then from there we drove another three hours. "These people never had (running) water," he said. "A typical way they get water is the women and children walk a couple miles downhill in a mountainous area and carry a 60-pound dairy can up a one-to two-mile hill, and the water they get is really polluted. All the sewage from the village is going into the water. When you see what they're drinking and they have to spend hours to go get that..." "So these people now, it's just transformed their lives," Church said, "because instead of spending hours walking downhill and getting oftentimes polluted water, they're able to have water come right into their homes."

For Church and his family – wife Linda and their children Jacob, Rachel, Josh and Nina – living the good life in Rancho Santa Fe since 2002, it's all about giving back in a socially-conscious manner. After all, Nika is Zulu for "to give."

"There's a whole concept of social entrepreneurialism that you hear about," said Church, the founder and president of a private equity firm specializing in acquiring and running manufacturing-related businesses. "Social entrepreneurs are the ones that are doing something more than just creating value for shareholders. That's what really motivates me, creating a whole social business that's sustainable. "If we could donate \$1 million a year, that's 50,000 lives we can positively affect," he said.

Instead, Nika earned a very handsome \$500,000 in sales during its first year in business.

"We were a little light on our revenue goal, but one of the cool things is we got the brand launched and we're really happy with how the brand looks, both from a social and an environmental standpoint," Church said.

"We got into Nika because we went to Ethiopia and Kenya and saw the water crisis first-hand," he said. "I have four kids that are in middle school and high school and when we came back they were inspired and wanted to make a difference. Working with them to help create Nika, to be able to do this, as well as many other young kids that we're working with, that really inspires me the most.

"I'm 50," said Church, "and when I was a youth, it was different then. The youth today are so much more socially- and environmentally-minded than my generation, and when I see their enthusiasm and energy, it really gives me hope for the future and confidence that we are in good hands, that our society's kids are going to make a difference.

"When you turn on running water like we did in Nicaragua for the very first time and you see the look on the faces of the people, and see them break down and cry, that's about as motivating as you could possibly ever get," he said.

"Nicaragua is something you can go touch and feel and see that what a fairly limited amount of money can do to really transform ones' life," said Church. "The great thing about going to Nicaragua is it brought the whole giving cycle full circle, particularly for the Nika team. By selling the (bottled) water here and donating the profits, we can build the wells to bring clean water to people."

Sadly, or unknowingly, one flush of the average American toilet is the three to five gallons of water people in the developing world get for an entire day if they're that fortunate. In stark contrast, Americans use 100 gallons each day. Church said half of the world's population doesn't have running water in their homes.

"We look at it as clean water is a basic human right," said Church. "There's over a billion people in the world that don't have access to clean water, and they should. From Nika's perspective, we've made that our passion to want to help with the profits from the sale of our bottled water, to use those profits to bring clean water to people that don't have it."

On tap for Nika is another collaboration with Project Concern, this time in Tanzania. Nika also works with the NGO Free the Children and together they're building a school in Kenya.

"The school has water systems that are on top of the roofs of the school buildings so they can catch the water when it rains and we put it into storage tanks," Church said.

For those fostering a personal socially-conscious mindset, Church advised a passionate soul-searching.

"Find your passion, whatever your passion is," he said. "Our passion is water. Someone else's passion might be human rights, animal rights, environmental rights. Find the thing that motivates you the most and get yourself educated on that subject and create awareness for yourself and then figure out a way for you to get involved in that project to make a difference.

But, "don't quit your day job," Church advised. "Work on it part-time as a hobby.

"I find that people that have a passion and a vocation that are matched are very fulfilled human beings," he said.

Church looks forward to Nika's return to Africa.

"I would like to go into really bad areas," he said, "failed areas in terms of being able to bring in clean water to the remote areas of Ethiopia and Malawi because people really are dying for lack of clean water.

"In Nicaragua, they had water," he said, "albeit somewhat polluted and they had to walk a long way for it, but they weren't dying like they're dying in Ethiopia. There's 4,000 people dying every day because of a lack of clean water and I would really like to go into one of those areas with Nika and invest in a project that you could save lives and not just transform lives."

Nika Water, bottled in the Sierra and currently sold in 250 Southern California stores including Jimbo's, will soon be available in Henry's, Whole Foods, Tully's Coffee and Baja Fresh restaurants.

For information about Nika Water's projects, call (800) 545-5841 and email [info@nikawater.org](mailto:info@nikawater.org).

To learn more, visit [www.nikawater.org](http://www.nikawater.org).

To watch a clip of Church's NIKA Water team turning on the tap for the first time in Jinotega, Nicaragua, go to <http://www.youtube.com/user/nikawater>.

Clips of Walk for Water 2010 and San Diego Walk for Water can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loRL8N8mMu8&feature=related> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pa0lx61Ut0&feature=fvw>.