



Gary White
California

Gary White was raised to lead a life of service. “My parents, teachers, and faith really instilled this passion in me,” he says. He discovered his calling to civil and environmental engineering in college, from what he had learned in high school from the Congregation of Christian Brothers—to live a life of service. “That was where I found an intersection of my greatest passion and the world’s greatest needs,” he says. “Engineering answers to the world’s problems would be the path that I would take from there on.”

Gary first started on his path of helping people living in poverty get access to microloans for clean water and sanitation with Water Partners in 1990. He’d read about Dr. Muhammad Yunus, who founded the Grameen Bank in 1983 to provide micro-credit loans to entrepreneurs, mostly women, in Bangladesh, and who had gone on to win the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. “Access to finance was the main barrier people always came up against,” Gary says. “They understood the issues their communities were facing and what approach was needed to remedy their issues. They just didn’t have any savings to do it. In rural areas, the issue is usually access to water and the tradeoff is time. A few hours’ walk might get you water, but a six-hour walk will get you higher quality water. In either case, there’s a lot of cost associated with all of that in lost time. Water Partners has worked to alleviate that with our microloan program.”

In urban areas, the tradeoffs manifest a bit differently. “When there’s no water available, people have to pay vendors 10-15 times the amount they’d pay if they had the money to get a direct connection to their local utility. The problem is that many people may have just \$1 a day to buy water from the vendor, but not \$300 to get the necessary connection. So they have to wait in long lines at public water faucets, which is another time sink. This is where loans can help in the long term.”

Gary quickly realized that the biggest bottleneck was getting access to wholesale capital, which he would need in order to get help to all the people who needed it. The problem was just too big to be addressed through microloans.

As fate would have it, Gary met Matt Damon in 2008 at the Clinton Global Initiative. At that time, Matt had been running an organization called H2O Africa, which helped supply people with drinking water in rural Africa. After talking with Gary, Matt realized that Water Partners had a track record of doing what he was trying to do, and he had the name and brand that could help them gain access to new and greater levels of funding. They realized that working together they could change the future of water. And so, with equally lofty goals in mind, they merged their organizations to form Water.org and Water Equity, an investment capital project and a sister organization that they hope will be able to scale the work of Water.org through wholesale capital.

Water.org and Water Equity have grown to include a committed team of corporate philanthropy and engagement partners helping to provide microloans to those in need, including the World Bank, Caterpillar, Mastercard Foundation, Ikea, the Bank of America, Pepsi, and the UN General Assembly.

Gary and Matt are leaders in a new generation of social entrepreneurs who are viewing problems like urban and rural water resilience, water scarcity, and water-stressed communities through a progressive lens. “To me, social entrepreneurship is basically looking at some of society’s biggest and most overlooked challenges and trying to apply more innovative and creative solutions to them,” Gary says, pointing out that in hubs like Silicon Valley, it’s of the utmost importance for entrepreneurs to fuel value creation. “When you apply that type of mindset and ingenuity to social problems, we can remake the world for the better. As a global community, we should agree to apply the same

level of talent and ingenuity to social issues as we do to getting out the newest iPhone.” Gary hopes that his work has raised awareness and inspired more people to get involved working on a solution to Sustainable Development Goal 6: clean water and sanitation for all.

In his travels to rural places, Gary noticed that accessing water has a variety of social ramifications he’d never really considered—like girls’ education, which is among the most concerning. Not having reliable access to water keeps girls out of school disproportionately. “In a lot of rural areas, if a family needs somebody to spend hours every day waiting in line fetching water, they usually end up sending a girl. So they don’t get to spend as much time learning, and occasionally they stop going to school altogether.” This is one of the most important reasons to get reliable water sources close to peoples’ homes, so that girls can go to school.

Perhaps the most widespread and least discussed impact of climate change is in terms of water resources and water scarcity. Gary sees climate change as potentially preventing hundreds of millions of people getting and maintaining access to clean water. “We know that climate change is contributing to stronger and more frequent floods, which are occurring with greater irregularity. This puts the most vulnerable among us in a very precarious situation. And flooding also raises sea levels, which can contaminate wells and make them unusable.” It can also interfere with infrastructure, making communities that have gained access to water less water resilient. “The way this problem manifests itself mostly is through water,” Gary says. “We need to ensure that our communities are resilient enough to tolerate the negative effects of climate change in the future.”

For young people interested in social entrepreneurship, Gary believes that education is the first responsibility of any venture that is trying to make a lasting impact on the world. “The first thing to do is to study up on sustainability issues and understand them inside and out. As you go through that process, you are going to see a lot of things that may stand in the way.”

Gary believes the best way to get overcome these obstacles is by connecting with a like-minded community. “In any venture, it’s important to look for people who are trying to work on the same problem, and get together with them to try and push your shared concept forward. That’s where entrepreneurship comes in. Most people individually can see a current problem and how to solve it now. But it takes a lot of people working together and looking at what is going to be the best way to fix these problems two or three years from now to fully realize what’s needed to make that happen.”

Gary has an inspiring question he says young entrepreneurs should ask of themselves. “Once you have the data and the community, it’s time to ask yourself, *Why not?* If there’s a gap that corporations and organizations aren’t able to fill, it’s incumbent upon you to fill that gap.” He adds, “I encourage the youth sustainability leaders and entrepreneurs to go out and try to implement creative solutions to the climate crisis. And I have a great amount of faith in the next generation to lead us through.”

*When you have a good idea, the community of fellow doers, and the will to act,
put your head down and work it.*

*As President Bill Clinton said to us when he learned about the success of WaterCredit
“just keep running those numbers up, keep running them up”.*

President Bill Clinton

Call to Action: To get involved with Gary and Matt’s work helping communities gain access to clean water and sanitation, please visit <https://water.org>.

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com