

## It's Not About the Water System: Honduras Trip Report, March 2016

By Emily Sotelo

*It's not about the water system-* it seems paradoxical to say when you've spent hours upon hours of volunteer time to design a rural water system, and then flown 2,000 miles to a developing country to see construction of it. While it is to a large extent obviously about the water system, to me WEFTA projects are so much more than *just* about building a water system in a rural, developing community.

It's about the people. It's about the relationships. It's about letting an indigenous people, who for many years were mistreated and all but forgotten, know that they are cared about, that they are important, and that they deserve the basic right to clean water. It's about empowering a community to build a water system to bring clean water to their homes and families. It's about the people.

When SMA engineers Andrew Robertson, Marty Howell, and myself went to Honduras in March 2016, we went to start the construction of a water system that I helped design for the indigenous Lenca people of the Honduran mountains. But a goal of mine was to keep the focus of the week about the people as much as about the water system. During our first night in Honduras, while speaking to a team of 10 men from a Tennessee church that have partnered with WEFTA to buy the materials for, and send a team down to help begin, the mainline of the water system in Monquecagua, I started out by telling the team: this is not about you, this is not even about getting this portion of the water project done this week, it's about the people, and the relationships you build with them over the short period you are here. The Tennessee/SMA team that worked in Monquecagua did a great job on keeping this a primary focus, while also getting their part of the mainline installed. And this is a little of what it looked like:



Sometimes it means taking a huge gulp of humility by openly laughing at yourself when you slip in the mud and fall when there's 40 community members sitting on the grass intently watching you as try to scope out a pipeline-realignment from the top of this muddy hill (see top).

Sometimes it means you have to get down and dirty with the community members as they work on the system instead of lording over them as if you know more than them because trust me, you don't (see left).



Sometimes it means taking a break from being an engineer and making paper airplanes with the local kids.

And most times, it's just stepping out of the community's way to let them take the lead and become self-sufficient.



In the end, we did end up meeting and exceeding our construction goals. But moreover, we let the community figure out how to put the system together by themselves, and hopefully practiced some good community-development skills so that they will be stronger *after* we leave and know that they've got more than enough of what it takes to provide for their own families, and for their community itself.

