



## Nonprofit's mission is to make clean water, sanitation available in Latin America

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These women, photographed in southwestern Honduras in 2016, walk long distances to collect water from a river or rain puddles. (SOURCE: Karen Pereira)

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Andrew Robertson is flying to Honduras today. Lou Harrington flew to Peru on Saturday.

Robertson, a civil engineer, will be checking in on a project under way to provide safe drinking water to 1,800 residents in three villages in southwest Honduras.

“In the dry season, December to April, these people have to walk two hours to and two hours from the river to get water,” Robertson said. “In the wet season, May to November, they walk 30 minutes to puddles.”



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Villagers in Honduras in 2017 dig a trench for a pipeline that will supply them with clean drinking water. The work is a project of Water Engineers for the Americas (WEFTA), a nonprofit founded in Santa Fe to provide safe drinking water and sanitation to countries in Latin America. (SOURCE: Andrew Robertson)

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Harrington, a landscape architect with extensive experience in international development, is attempting to lay the groundwork for establishing waste-treatment plants in Peru's Urubamba Valley, the Sacred Valley of the Incas in the Andes. It's an ongoing effort, thwarted in the past by changes in the country's political leadership.

Robertson, 46, and Harrington, 58, both Albuquerque residents and both fluent in Spanish, are volunteers with Water Engineers for the Americas (WEFTA), a nonprofit founded in 2002 by a group of engineers and professionals at Souder, Miller and Associates (SMA), an engineering firm with headquarters in Santa Fe. WEFTA's mission is to work with communities throughout Latin America to make safe drinking water and proper sanitation available.

"In developing countries, water can mean the difference between life and death," said Peter Fant of Santa Fe, CEO of SMA, a founder of WEFTA and president of the WEFTA board. "Forty percent of hospitals in developing countries lack access to water and sanitation. Lack of water can become the barrier that keeps girls out of school because women and young girls are responsible for fetching and hauling water."

### **The heart to help**

WEFTA evolved out of Waterlines, another Santa Fe nonprofit started in 1986 to provide basic water systems, latrines and hygiene education in developing countries.

Harrington said WEFTA was started to tackle water and sanitation projects that required a technical expertise beyond that available at Waterlines, projects such as the Honduran waterline Robertson is inspecting this week.

Robertson said that project, about 50 percent completed, is one of the most complicated he has confronted in his career. It includes 14 miles of high-pressure transmission pipeline that goes downhill, across a canyon and then up a thousand feet, all through mountainous, jungle terrain.

"We welcome these more complex projects," Harrington said. "We are lucky at Souder, Miller because we have access to so many civil engineers."

Harrington, who worked six years for Habitat for Humanity in Peru, Colombia and Mexico, and Robertson are both SMA employees. The company uses its WEFTA connection as a recruiting tool and Robertson, who did volunteer work with the Save the Children organization in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch hit that country in 1998, said that sold him on the firm.

But WEFTA volunteers don't just come from SMA. They come from everywhere there are people who have the heart to help others.

“People who are in the water industry are inclined this way,” Fant said. “If you want to make money, you don’t get into building water systems.”

Now, more than 50 volunteers work on WEFTA projects in Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama and Peru.

They include:

- ◊ John Lincoln, 70, of Boise, Idaho, a retired civil engineer and WEFTA board treasurer, who has provided technical advice for WEFTA projects in Bolivia, El Salvador and Peru.
- ◊ Scott Rogers, 61, of Bountiful, Utah, WEFTA board vice president and president of a Utah civil engineering firm, who has worked with WEFTA projects in Bolivia and Peru.
- ◊ Blanca Surgeon, 54, WEFTA board secretary, who is from Honduras but lives in Santa Fe and works for a nonprofit that provides technical assistance, training and funding to rural communities in New Mexico. She has assisted in WEFTA projects in Honduras, Guatemala and Bolivia.

Rogers said he was attracted to WEFTA because it is a relatively small organization.

“There are many organizations that do what we do – Engineers Without Borders, Water for People – but they are so big,” he said. “For me, the hands-on approach is better. Scope out a project, do it, keep track of it. You’ve got to have someone on the ground coordinating the project, seeing that it continues. Stay small and responsive and reactive.”

### **Shovel power**

WEFTA gets its funding from foundations, non-governmental organizations, companies and individuals. It supports its volunteers with air fare, expenses related to the WEFTA project, and the cost of visas and vaccinations, etc. But the volunteers donate their time.

The communities aided by the project kick in as much monetary support as they can afford, up to 40 percent to 60 percent of the cost, and most of the labor. Robertson talks about a column of 100 people with shovels, spaced 30 feet apart, digging trenches for pipelines in Honduras.

“They’ll dig a trench up to 3,000 feet long in a day with shovels,” he said. “Here (in the states), contractors will get 600 feet in a day using power equipment.”

Robertson will spend a week in Honduras and Harrington a week in Peru.

“Nothing ever goes as fast or as efficient as you think it will,” Robertson said. “The problem with building an infrastructure is there is no infrastructure. It’s not like they have everything except water.”

But the rewards are worth the frustrations along the way.

“Working with WEFTA is the most satisfying thing I have done professionally,” board treasurer Lincoln said. “You are helping people who have never had clean, running water, and they are so appreciative.”

## **HOW TO HELP**

Water Engineers for the Americas (WEFTA) is a nonprofit dedicated to helping communities in Latin America attain safe drinking water and effective sanitation. Donations are tax deductible and 100 percent of all donations go directly to water and sanitation projects.

To find the best ways to donate, go to [wefta.net](http://wefta.net) and click on "Donate."

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