

GOOD WORKS

BY CELIA SHATZMAN

CAUSE →

WATER.ORG

MATT DAMON & GARY WHITE

Sparkling and still, bottled and tap—there are plenty of drinking water options in the United States. But in developing countries, more than a billion people don't have clean water and proper sanitation. "Water is such a basic life necessity, but so easy to take for granted," says Matt Damon. "In the U.S. we simply turn the tap and it appears, hot or cold, and clean. But for so many people around the world, it's an almost unthinkable luxury to have drinkable water right at home."

That's why the Academy Award-winning actor co-founded H2O Africa in 2006. Three years later he and Gary White, who co-founded WaterPartners in 1990, decided to merge their organizations into

Water.org. "In villages in northern Ethiopia women walk up to six hours a day to rivers that are sometimes contaminated by animals or go dry," says Gary. "And right under their feet—30 or 40 meters—is safe water." Since its founding, Water.org has brought clean water to hundreds of thousands of people in Africa, South Asia and Central America.

"There are few places in the world with a water situation as severe as the one in Tigray [Ethiopia]," says Matt. "We visited the community of Anahem, which had a hand-dug well shared by 6,000 people. Some people were standing inside the well, while others threw tin cans tied with ropes into the hole. The kids held up plastic bottles of filthy brown water to show me what they'd have to drink at school, and I knew that some of them would be sick before the day was over." Water.org brought in the funding to build a new well, and helped

the locals form their own water committee, which is responsible for maintaining and operating the system.

Another project is the WaterCredit Initiative, a network of microfinance organizations. A major focus of this program is India, where many are too poor to pay for plumbing in their homes. The nonprofit joined forces with a local NGO that works to secure small loans (typically \$75 to \$100) for slum dwellers, so they can get a home connection to a local water utility facility. "If you give them access to credit, they can afford to pay for their own solution," says Gary.

Gary and Matt plan to add locations until everyone has clean water. "Nothing improves life in a community more fundamentally," says Matt, "than having clean water." ●

FamilyCircle.com

Read the full interview with Matt Damon at familycircle.com/mattdamon

Having no access to clean water is a global health issue that accounts for 3.5 million deaths every year.

**CAN-DO
GANTEEN** >>>

Help the environment—and people around the world—with a special limited-edition CamelBak water bottle made of BPA-free plastic (\$19) or insulated stainless steel (\$25). All profits go to Water.org. To order or to make a donation, visit gift.water.org.