



HabiHut Building on Success in Haiti and Africa

Belgrade social entrepreneurs creating villages, solar powered water kiosks



BY EMILY STIFLER

Haiti, says Bruce Leep, was *really* hot. His photos show a collection of small, white shelters called HabiHuts, grouped in a meadow. This February, Bruce and his brother, Brian, both Montanans, spent five days in Jacmel, a half hour outside Port-au-Prince. Working with a group of eight local men, they set up the village of shelters for earthquake survivors. With three people working, each hut went up—with ease, aside from the heat—in about two hours.

Through HabiHut, Bruce has also worked in Kenyan slums. “To be there and see, smell and hear how bad it is, was a big eye opener,” he says.

For 20 years, Bruce and his father Eldon had a construction business together in Montana. They first started designing the HabiHut in 2008. While creating the concept, the Leeps partnered with Ronald Omyonga, a Kenyan architect who’d worked with MSU engineering students. Omyonga suggested designing a shelter that was easy to put up, lightweight and low cost. They wanted it to be long-lasting, strong, easy to disassemble and move, resistant to wind, rain and fire, expandable and environmentally friendly.

They came up with a 400-pound, 118-square-foot structure made of durable, corrugated polypropylene and high strength aluminum. The hexagonal floor plan and high-pitched roof create 100 percent space usage, and the roof and windows allow cross ventilation. The double panel walls repel rain, wind, dust and UV, and insulate from outside temperatures. Minimal tools are required for setup. A single unit can be packed in a 96”x 48”x 24” box, costs \$2500 U.S., and is recyclable.

“[This is] the first time I’ve seen the world from a global point of view,” says Eldon, who was also a minister for many years. “I was born and raised in the Gallatin Valley, and that’s really all I saw for most of my life. Now I’m seeing much more, and caring about much more.”

Back in Montana, the Leeps and HabiHut President Buz Weas are reviewing Bruce’s trip to Haiti, as well as another recent success: Last year, in cooperation with NGOs, HabiHut installed three solar/water kiosks in Kenya.

The units took a day to install, versus the six months it takes other established water kiosks—and at a third less the cost. Solar panels provided light and cell phone charging. During the first three months, 85 percent of total sales were in water, and 15 percent in phone charging. Open from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., each kiosk served an average of 2,600 customers monthly. At night, the solar-powered lights provided added neighborhood safety, another advantage over other existing kiosks.

SIDA, a Swedish NGO that was involved in the program, says this pilot was one of their most successful projects that year. Based on the program’s success and proven financial viability, HabiHut is creating the “Hot Spring Micro-Franchise” initiative, a turn-key business ready to sell to micro-entrepreneurs for immediate in the developing world. In addition to water

sales and phone charging, the franchises will offer billboard advertising and pre-paid cell phone card sales as additional revenue streams.

The Initiative will work with cell phone service providers, cell phone trade associations, water NGOs, and micro-finance organizations. Weas says HabiHut is “very close to signing one of the world’s largest companies as a major sponsor.” That company is a significant player in water technology. “We are also pretty far along in dialogue with a key mobile phone carrier that will sponsor this initiative,” he adds.

HabiHut will announce these strategic partnerships in April. “If we convince them in the whole enchilada, that would be a million dollar project,” Weas says.

Their goals for the initial Kenyan program are:

1. To provide 100,000 people with clean drinking water. The average person needs 2.5 liters of water per day. They plan to provide 5 liters per day, per person.
2. Provide cellular charging for 2,500 phones per day.
3. Provide 100 economically sustainable micro-franchise businesses.
4. Provide 150 jobs.
5. Provide shelters for 100 families.

HabiHut’s creators are thinking big: “The potential to help people is awesome,” says Eldon. “Potentially millions of people could benefit.”

Company President Buz Weas, a successful entrepreneur and former Yellowstone Club builder, says it’s different being involved with a company that has social responsibility.

“None of us have been paid anything for our efforts for the last year and a half. We keep scratching our way forward and pushing on this thing hard, just because we really want to make a difference.”



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