

A Single Drop of Water

by Robert Freeman



A story of how a high school
teacher and his students
set out to change the world,
with a dollar

“Even the greatest waterfall starts
with a single drop of water.”

~ African Bantu Saying

Chapter Eleven—Teacher Heroes

Holley Arbeit, Bakersfield, CA



Holley Arbeit is a native New Yorker but has lived across the states and from England to Ecuador. She now lives and teaches in Bakersfield, in southern California. She is the co-advisor of Stockdale High School's International Club which encourages its members to celebrate their unique backgrounds, experience others' cultures, and create positive change in their community. She has supervised six ODFL drives at her school, helping her students fund new schools in Kenya, Indonesia, Nicaragua (2), and Nepal. She chaperoned an ODFL trip to Nicaragua in the summer of 2011. Holley believes her life has been deeply enriched by being able to give back to her world.

When I was approached by One Dollar For Life in the fall of 2008 to do a fundraiser at my school, Stockdale High School in Bakersfield, California, I was skeptical. I have lived in a developing Latin American country and seen how often well-intentioned “relief” money is squandered. I was soured by seeing projects that had been conceived by outsiders, but that had little relevance to the actual community they were supposed to serve. And I have been extremely disheartened at how much money goes to locals “managing” the projects, and how little to the projects themselves. In actuality, those who donated would almost never know that their donations were ill-spent, but I knew.

So, when Terry Kropp asked for our help, I was reluctant and explained why. Terry set up a meeting with Robert Freeman, ODFL's founder. At the meeting I questioned the “checks and balances” that ODFL had in place to assure the value of local “giving.” I also questioned what the organization had to show for its efforts. In every exchange, Robert was able to soundly justify their procedures and results. In addition, he related how involving US students in the fundraising was a critical piece of ODFL's mission. I value both volunteerism and student empowerment so I decided to take a chance and support ODFL through our International Club's fundraising effort. After just the first year, ODFL has become a critical partner to our club's mission - offering a tangible avenue for students to “give back” to our world community.

ODFL offers American students the chance to directly improve the lives of students in developing countries. Our students become the voice of change for the better. They learn the logistical how-to's of fundraising at a school-wide rally, lunchtime activities, and classroom presentation. They learn about the unique needs of the communities where their funds are earmarked for a new project. They make a genuine effort to

appreciate other cultures and values. The most satisfying part of the process is hearing teenagers proclaim that they *can* have an impact in improving their world. How many times do we ever hear that, students talking about what they can do for the world?

Honestly, I don't know if the students realize the positive impact that they have on others around them, both their peers, and even faculty. Through their actions, they show others the value of *doing* something, and not just being cynical or apathetic. They create PowerPoint presentations for the entire student body and make individual classroom presentations for the entire school. They manage all the tasks, prioritize the activities, set deadlines, and delegate teams of students to complete the tasks. It's an impressive undertaking. And, the students do this on their own initiative because they see the direct impact that results from their efforts. I've never seen another activity that does so much to show students what they are capable of.

When our annual ODFL campaign is finished, many students remain active in volunteerism and developing their leadership skills. Some of the initially shy students go on to create other campaigns to increase awareness of the needs in a developing country. Then, when the photos begin coming back of the construction of the school or project THEY helped fund, the pride is just enormous. "WE built this computer lab. Now we have to put the computers in it." This was the sentiment surrounding our most recent project, a computer lab at an all-girls' school in Kenya. I am so proud of these students!

Sometimes students have the chance to work "in country" on a project they have helped fund. They pay their own way, but they get to see firsthand both the need and the extent to which a one dollar donation can help. In July 2011, I chaperoned one such trip with 16 California students on a two-week work trip to Nicaragua. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere and our locale was reflected that poverty.

The students were eager to participate, learn, and connect with their hosts in the community. In spite of a language barrier, they communicated with broad smiles, warm demeanors, gestures, and use of whatever Spanish words they knew—or acquired. There were definitely situations that were difficult to cope with, like intestinal "discomforts," rudimentary bathroom facilities, abundant insects, and a limited variety of food, along with our hard-working conditions in the hot sun. But during daily group debriefings, the students expressed enthusiasm for each experience, always managing to find a "bigger meaning" in their temporary adversity.

ODFL has offered a framework not just to build schools, but to build positive values in our students: finding our commonalities; personal responsibility; and connecting to each other, personally and globally. Being a speech-language pathologist, I love engaging all students in experiences that build communication and breakdown barriers. This is one of the best such programs I have ever seen.