

# Ryan's Well

*By Jayne Keedle*

## Small steps can help solve the world's water crisis.

Kids really can make a difference. Just ask 15-year-old Ryan Hreljac (HURL-jak) of Kemptville, Canada. When he was 6, he learned about the shortage of safe drinking water in some parts of the world. Today, Ryan's Well Foundation has raised more than \$1.5 million to build more than 700 wells in 16 countries, most of them in Africa.

During his mission to raise money, Ryan became pen pals with Akana Jimmy, an orphan who lived in Africa. In Jimmy's tiny village of Agweo, Uganda, there was no clean water until Ryan raised enough money to buy the village its first well. A new book tells the story of their life-changing friendship—*Ryan and Jimmy and the Well in Africa That Brought Them Together*.

## Two Different Worlds

Jimmy used to wake up before midnight and walk 3 miles to the nearest pond. There, he would fill a large plastic container with **contaminated**,<sup>1</sup> or polluted, water. Jimmy made that trip three times every day before heading to school. "Because you don't have any choice, you drink it," he told *WR News*.

In 1998, Ryan's first-grade teacher told the class that polluted water was causing thousands of children to become sick and even die. For Ryan, a lack of clean water was unimaginable. His teacher said the cost of building a well in Africa was just \$70. Determined to help, Ryan spent months doing household chores to earn enough money to pay for a well.

Later that year, Ryan proudly took his savings to WaterCan, a Canadian organization that helps provide safe drinking water to impoverished countries. To his disappointment, Ryan was told that the cost of building a well was much higher: \$2,000.

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1 **contaminated:** unable to be used because of the presence of something harmful

## Reading Passage

Ryan **vowed**, or promised, to continue raising money. Word of his mission spread, and soon the media picked up his story. To Ryan's astonishment, people started sending him donations. By 2000, Ryan, then 9, had raised enough money to build his first well. With help from Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief, Ryan chose Jimmy's village as the site for the well.

### All's Well That Ends Well

Ryan's well changed the lives of the people in Agweo and especially affected Jimmy's life. That's when the two boys became pen pals. They became friends when Ryan traveled to Uganda in 2000 to help complete the well.

In 2003, Ryan's family arranged to bring Jimmy to their home in Canada. "We used to live as friends," Jimmy, now 17, says, "but now we live as brothers."

The two teenagers hope their book will raise awareness about unsafe drinking water and prompt people to take action to help. "The situation is difficult, but you have to start somewhere," Ryan says. "We need to work harder to make the world a better place."

### Water Isn't Everywhere

More than two-thirds of Earth's surface is covered by water, so you might think there is enough to go around. You may be surprised to learn that water is scarce. Only a limited amount of water is drinkable. Salty seawater makes up about 97 percent of the world's water. Another 2 percent is frozen at the North and South Poles.

More than 1 billion people around the world don't have access to safe drinking water, according to the United Nations. Why isn't all the freshwater available to people safe for drinking? Chemicals from factories, **fertilizers**<sup>2</sup> from farms, and untreated **sewage**<sup>3</sup> pollute the water supply. "One of our goals is to educate people about the importance of clean water," says Ryan.

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<sup>2</sup> **fertilizers**: substances used to make soil more suitable for growing

<sup>3</sup> **sewage**: human waste matter and water removed by a system of pipes and ditches