

Small Changes, Big Success

After graduating with her MBA from Northeastern University, Jenean Smith began climbing the corporate ladder, working her way up to a management position at a dot-com company in San Francisco.

Even though she had made it close “to the top,” Smith says, “I just couldn’t shake this hollow feeling, like I was missing something.” So she decided to figure out just what that was. A year later, after applying to the Peace Corps, she was living in the rural community of San Lorenzo, Nicaragua.

“The experience made me realize that I could do a lot of good as an individual. I didn’t need to work with an NGO or a government project. I just needed to set a goal and work at it,” she adds.

Her time in Nicaragua convinced her that one person can make a difference. “I joined the Peace Corps thinking I needed a structured program and lots of support to have any real impact on people’s lives, and while I have tremendous respect for the program, I was surprised by how little help I was given,” Smith says.

Smith’s latest endeavor is Power to the People (PTTP), a nonprofit organization that works with communities in rural Nicaragua to install solar-electric systems on community buildings, such as schools, health-care centers, libraries, and orphanages.

Having relied upon kerosene lamps for lighting while living in Nicaragua and Honduras, Smith learned firsthand of kerosene’s problems—its high cost, unhealthy fumes, and flammability hazards. Recognizing the need for a clean, renewable source of



Above: A Las Cuchillas community volunteer cuts the EZ mount rack for the battery-based PV system.

Below: Schoolgirls in front of the 680 W PV system on the school in Las Cuchillas, Nicaragua.



Courtesy: Power to the People (2)

electricity in rural communities, PTTP started with the mission of raising enough money to install a 1 kW PV system on the roof of a public school in El Pedregal, Nicaragua.

Although Smith didn't have the technical expertise to install PV systems on her own, she leveraged what she did have—marketing savvy. Upon her return to the States, she solicited donations from businesses and organized fundraising activities—silent auctions, concerts, and even “green” speed-dating events, where “eco-conscious” people donated \$25 for the opportunity to meet other like-minded folk.

She assembled a team of volunteers, calling on members of a renewable energy discussion group that she hosted when living in Los Angeles. Before long, she had convinced an energy consultant, a city planner, a solar engineer, and a host of other talented individuals to donate their time and resources to the cause. The group raised funds to cover the project's cost, including the expenses for a six-person volunteer crew to travel to the site and install the off-grid, battery-based system.

In March of 2009, the school's system was installed. “The PV system not only brought light to the small community,” says Smith, “but it also provided a place to hold community meetings and night classes for adults. It made it possible for people of all ages to attend televised distance learning classes, and it created income for the school by selling electricity to charge cell phones.”

Since then, PTTP has raised more than \$75,000 and solicited nearly \$25,000 in equipment donations. The group also stepped up its fundraising efforts with a “voluntourism” program, in which people pay for the opportunity to travel to Nicaragua and work on a PTTP project.

In April 2010, the group completed its second project in Las Cuchillas, Nicaragua—a 680 W PV system for a rural, two-room school and a 225 W PV-powered battery charging station at a small library.

Next up is an installation in the central Nicaraguan community of Las Lajas—a 1.4 kW PV system and a 450 W PV battery charging station at the elementary school, and a 340 W PV system at the health care center. Future projects include an ambitious plan to power an entire town in Nicaragua with a batteryless PV system.

—Kelly Davidson

web extra

To learn more about PTTP and how you can help, visit powertothepeople.org.



Tired of fighting your distributor?



North America's Premier Distributor of ET Solar Modules.



800-578-0418 • www.ussolardistributing.com

 Visit us at Booth 3328