

A Life that Overflows

Living Wells: a young man's legacy

By Sandi Michon

John Sarnik always believed in life after death, but would never have imagined his own death would bring life to so many—even people halfway around the world.



PURE ENJOYMENT

— A young girl from the Indian village of Shivam savors water from the new well provided in John Sarnik's memory.

(Photo courtesy of Operation Blessing)

Only 27 years old, West Springfield resident John Sarnik passed away in his sleep on October 16, 2008. Even though Sarnik had chronic health issues*, family, friends and co-workers were stunned by his death and searched for a way to honor the young man who had so impacted their lives.

As Dorrie Champagne went through her son's belongings, she discovered he had often donated funds from his meager budget to organizations that supplied clean water to those in need.

"There are a lot of worthy causes in the world; I'm not sure why the need for clean drinking water hit John so hard—maybe because he was diabetic and was thirsty a lot," Champagne reasoned. Her research revealed that millions of people struggle to retrieve water, and more than 4,000 people die every day—1.5 million per year—from drinking polluted water.

The family decided that a "Living Well" would help those in need and provide a legacy for Sarnik. They chose Operation Blessing (OB.org), which received Charity Navigator's highest rating, and provides several types of humanitarian relief in the United States and internationally. From the program's inception ten years ago through August 2009, Operation Blessing has completed 10,022 wells and 7,065 cisterns.

Memorial donations poured in, enough to fund the drilling of two water wells—and then John's co-workers at Costco contributed money for a third well. Two wells were drilled in India to honor Sarnik's friendship with Sarabjit "Pintu" Chawla, proprietor of Pintu's Indian Palace in West Springfield. On July 13 and 20, 2009, wells #8122 and #8123 were dedicated in the villages of Bhoomi Nagar and Shivam, respectively. Dozens attended the dedication ceremonies which were led by local ministers and where three villagers came to faith in Christ—a faith that Sarnik held precious.

Prior to the well digs, the only source of water for the village of Shivam was an old hand pump which took 15-20 minutes to fill just one pot of water. Many had to purchase their daily ration from a tanker truck, paying with money they could not afford. The villagers of Bhoomi Nagar had to walk almost half a mile to get water from an open, muddy well, water which often made them ill. The morning lines for the well were so long, one woman said, that she sometimes missed her day's work—and wages—getting the water her family needed.

The third well is designated for South Africa and slated for completion this month.

Sarnik's best friend gave the eulogy at the memorial service. "John gave me hope when I had none. That was John at his core—always giving," said Christopher Abel, now a youth pastor in Missouri. "Even in death, he has managed to give hope to those in need, whether in India, Africa, or Western Mass. John gave his all... and then kept giving. Now it's our turn," said Abel.

Memorial donations that came in after the Living Well designations were given to International Water Management Systems, a ministry in Iowa (iwmsystems.com). Their handheld units, which are in use worldwide, start at just \$200 and are capable of purifying water for a single household or for several thousand people.

For Sarnik, "John 3:16" was more than a placard at a Red Sox game; it was an example to live by and promise of a future beyond this life. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life."

"John loved, so he gave," said his mom. "He gave of himself and he gave of his resources. He believed God's Word and tried to live what he read."

"The Costco employees have been the most incredible support," Sarnik's mom continued. "They loved John like family and took good care of him." Champagne says her son is now safe with God—"who can take care of him better than any of us."

"No one had a bad thing to say about him. He was loved by so many people," said Sue Blanchet who worked with John at Costco. "John may have only been 100+ pounds, but it was 'all heart.'"

"He was a kind, gentle soul—he always had a smile for everyone. No matter how he felt, he was always there to lend a helping hand," said Costco associate Mary Jo Kiernan.



JOHN SARNIK

"I wish I could personally thank each one who gave," said Champagne. "It amazes me that John's short life—and now his death—impacted so many lives." She added, "It makes me very happy to picture John in heaven now—happy, healthy and whole."

**Autopsy results showed that ketoacidosis had claimed Sarnik's life—a dangerous condition which can develop rapidly when a person with diabetes gets the flu.*



WOMEN AT THE WELL – Villagers from Bhoomi Nagar and Shivam bring their water pots to the new wells, provided through contributions to Operation Blessing in memory of John Sarnik, who died Oct. 16, 2008.