

# SOPHIE HOLLINGSWORTH

IT'S AN EASY THING TO TAKE FOR GRANTED—TURN ON THE TAP, FILL A GLASS, AND HAVE A DRINK OF WATER. WHEN NYU SOPHOMORE SOPHIE HOLLINGSWORTH REALIZED THAT NEARLY 1 BILLION PEOPLE WORLDWIDE DON'T HAVE SAFE DRINKING WATER, SHE TOOK ACTION.

While she was still in high school, Sophie founded AquaAid International ([aquaaid-international.org](http://aquaaid-international.org)), an organization that works with rural communities to improve water quality and teach schoolchildren basic sanitation. Now she's using her time at NYU to major in environmental studies with a minor in global public health and make AquaAid even more of a success.

#### A Personal Connection

It was on a sailing trip—Sophie has a captain's license and has sailed around the world—that she met two young girls in Bahia Honda, Panama. The girls were excited, telling her they were about to go to school for the first time because a new pipeline was finally bringing safe drinking water to their village. "Before the pipeline it took them almost a day's travel to get water, which left little time for education," Sophie explains. The encounter affected her deeply. "I saw this as my opportunity to make a difference," she says. But the more she researched, the more she realized her mission had to be twofold. Providing clean drinking water would stop the spread of many diseases, but not if education about crucial hygiene practices, such as hand washing, was left out of the equation.

#### Start with Kids

Sophie's crewmate on that trip, Jose Simon Espinoza, was from Karahola, Nicaragua, which had a water problem similar to the one Sophie had heard about from the Panamanian girls. Sophie and Simon started a plan to improve the situation in Karahola, and AquaAid was born. When Sophie came to NYU, it was to major in global public health and continue her work. "I took the Fundamentals of Social Entrepreneurship course last semester and gained a lot of insight into the resources available here," she says. Those resources include courses in public health, advice from professors and peers, and entrepreneurial clubs and events hosted by NYU. For AquaAid's first venture in Karahola, Sophie started with the crucial basics: "We decided to focus AquaAid's education efforts on the children because they were much more willing to make lifestyle changes." As she continues her studies, she's become even more aware of how important kids can be when it comes to large-scale transformations. "Children can be agents of change for their families and an internal motivation for community development," she says.

#### What's Next

Sophie and her team distribute easy-to-maintain water filters, and they keep the educational aspects of the program fun, handing out coloring books on sanitation and singing songs about washing hands. They also play a version of duck-duck-goose in which kids put glitter on their hands so they can see how germs spread. Now, with the right education and resources, the town's families have access to more than enough safe water. As she continues to develop AquaAid, Sophie is applying what she learns as an environmental studies major. She brought on Federico Brokate, a sophomore at NYU's Leonard N. Stern School of Business, to become AquaAid's director of finances. "Bringing on someone to help with daily operations was a moment of success for me," Sophie says. "It meant AquaAid had grown so much that I couldn't run the stateside operations solo any longer." The expansion doesn't stop there: Sophie hopes to reach more communities around the world, and NYU is helping. "My professors have been incredibly supportive of my work with AquaAid, both by helping me develop it and by helping me network and tap into resources around the city and the world," she says. "They understand that my academic experience isn't separate from AquaAid. They feed each other." ■

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