

More than 39,000 people call Otavalo, Ecuador, home, based on the 2010 census. Filter of Hope, an organization that seeks to meet needs for clean water globally, reaches this community. “We want to be a part of what [God] is already doing in these communities around the world,” says Sean Sutherland, a ministry coordinator for Filter of Hope. “[Giving a water filter is] a great chance to sit down and get to know someone, to hear their story, hear about their life, connect with them personally, help meet the physical need, and then share about the spiritual need.”

Athletes Team Up to Create Change with Clean Water

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From impure to pure, from contaminated to clean, a water filter creates a visual for groups of college athletes to explain the transformative work of Jesus. In the highlands of Otavalo, Ecuador, students from the University of Iowa and Marquette University visited homes offering men and women the tangible gift of a filter as well as a spiritual metaphor.

These interactions took place during a weeklong spring break trip in March 2022 with [Athletes in Action®](#), a Cru® ministry that seeks to “build spiritual movements everywhere through the platform of sport.” Fourteen current and former student athletes, as well as an AIA staff member and an intern, took part in the effort with [Filter of Hope](#), an organization that “brings clean water and Christ’s love to those in desperate need of both.” A ministry coordinator from Filter of Hope, local church members and translators also joined the group.

College students moved through unknowns to invest their time during break from classes. When they reached Ecuadorian village homes with the life-changing filters,

joy, hope-filled conversations and confidence flowed, too, as a result of clean water and the change it could bring.



A monument to Inca General Rumiñahui stands in the Otavalo city square, with the church Iglesia Catolica San Luis towering behind it. About 80% of Ecuadorians who claim to have a religious affiliation consider themselves Roman Catholic, according to a 2012 survey by the National Institute of Statistics and Census.



Men and women in Otavalo, a city in northern Ecuador, venture from homes in the highlands of the Andes Mountains onto city streets. Otavalo rests at 8,441 feet above sea level — about 56 miles from Quito, Ecuador's capital.



Logan Lee, a junior at the University of Iowa, got involved with Athletes in Action® not long after starting college. Now, he leads a Bible study and emcees the group's weekly meeting. When he heard about the spring break trip, he expected personal growth on his first international mission trip.



Part of the University of Iowa Athletes in Action® student team strolls through the city of Otavalo. The group consists of athletes of different sports, including volleyball and football.



A vendor grills “pinchos,” an Ecuadorian street food.



A young girl watches the Athletes in Action® group pass by her home.



Monte Pottebaum, a student at the University of Iowa, talks about his background and life story during breakfast at the hotel. During the trip, students grew to know each other on deeper levels by sharing details in life and their origins and influences.



The Athletes in Action® group prays together in the highlands just before separating to give away water filters and start spiritual conversations.

“It’s pretty nerve-racking talking to people through a translator; you don’t know if you’ll be well-accepted,” says student Logan Lee, who plays football at the University of Iowa. “But it was nice to have the filter as that introduction.”



Each day, three or four Athletes in Action® students or staff members visit families' homes along with a translator and a local church member.



Berenice Tituana (left) listens to Logan explain how the water filter works. She lives with her mother and works in town. At the end of the interaction, Bernice prays and trusts Jesus into her life.



Logan talks about how to backflush the water filter to clean out the dirt after using it. The filters are easy to clean and last for 10 years. Javier Pico translates Logan's instructions into Spanish for Bernice.



Logan holds a beetle, which he decided to pop in his mouth for three seconds on a dare from the other students.



A pig hangs out at a local dwelling. The tropical mountain climate provides cool temperatures in the morning and at night.

Filter of Hope has identified more than 2 billion people around the world affected by the [global water crisis](#). This trip with Logan's group was the organization's first team sending effort in Ecuador.

And with the goal of continuing conversations started by clean water, Filter of Hope joins with local churches to meet this essential need. In addition, [Unto®](#), Cru's humanitarian aid ministry, also works with Cru national

partners around the world to share water filters and respond to the ongoing crisis.



Partnering with Filter of Hope
Cru Storylines

01:28

Logan talks about the significance of the Athletes in Action® mission trip to Ecuador in partnership with Filter of Hope. He also tells a story about his group meeting a woman who received a water filter with gratitude.

Clint Coyan, who serves in Ecuador with Emmaus Global Missions, connected the college group with members of an existing church and an Ecuadorian missionary planting a church. At least three families started attending the church plant because of the ministry they experienced when the group brought water filters to their community.

The students journeyed to two different communities. In one community, a woman expressed her deep gratitude for the filter.

“It was emotional for myself and everybody else who was involved,” Logan says, “to see the joy.”

The woman began to open up about her personal experience with faith. She came from a religious

background but hadn't practiced her faith for a long time. In those moments, the group had a chance to talk about the gospel and the promise of grace versus trying to do good works to get to heaven.

Some Ecuadorians spoke about their personal struggles, and some began relationships with Jesus. When others didn't want to talk further about faith, they and the students still interacted respectfully.

"It's incredible to see how well people respond," Logan says.



Maximo Luzon (left) and her daughters receive a water filter from the Athletes in Action® group. Each filter can produce up to 250 gallons of clean water daily.



Amy Lenderink talks about the water filter with Jose Manuel Lita and friends. The teams passed out more than 80 filters over the course of the trip.



Jose tries some filtered water. Some people in Otavalo travel into the city for bottled water because their water source is contaminated.



Logan (far right) talks about the good news of the gospel with Jose (left, in dark jacket) and other men. The students received training demonstrating how to use the filter, and making a connection between water purification and how Jesus cleanses people from sin. The water represents a sinful life that Jesus makes clean by sacrificing his life on the cross. Groups can use other metaphors as well, like pouring clean water into dirty water to show that doing good things (adding clean water) can't bring true cleansing from sin. Only the filter, which represents Jesus, can do that work.

Jonatan Posligua, a student, also gained experience in clearly talking about the gospel with people. Having grown up in Ecuador, he understood the culture, and his parents drove from their home — detouring around landslides along the way — to join the students. Although he could speak Spanish and felt familiar with the

environment, Jonatan voiced surprise by people not knowing about Jesus, which he recognized as a great spiritual need.

“It is a life-changing experience for many people,” he says, “both for you participating in the trip and for those who listen to the gospel.”



Students wait for the bus so they can travel back to Otavalo —ending the day at their hotel. The bus brings them to the highlands each morning, takes them to and from the city for lunch, and then back to their hotel.



Athletes in Action® staff member Tim Spark (left) and Benton Weinberg (right), a former student, compete in a spontaneous foot race at the end of the day. Benton played for the University of Iowa's golf team.



Desmond Hutson (second from right), a former football player from the University of Iowa, talks about Jesus with Luis Vinveza and his family.





Nancy Vinueza (right) and her 82-year-old mother, Maria, listen to Desmond communicate the gospel.



Luis backflushes a water filter to clean out the dirt. Since the AIA trip, Clint Coyan's Emmaus Global Missions team continues to buy water filters and uses them as a ministry tool in communities all over Ecuador, even when groups don't visit.



Luis (left with hat) prays to invite Jesus into his life. In addition to Luis, 33 other people prayed in this way during the students' visits to homes.

Another transformation happened among the student-athletes. They bonded just like a sports team during their shared time together and working alongside each other. The group even arranged a night of playing soccer with locals.

“Our group has become more of a community,” Logan confirms, “and we have grown closer through being uncomfortable sharing the gospel.”

An Athletes in Action team from the University of Iowa plans to head back to Ecuador in 2023. The mission moves forward in the country with a desire to serve and get to know people, learning about deeper needs.



Athletes in Action® students pause for a moment with translators and their bus driver. Imbabura Volcano is visible in the background.

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