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Ed Atchley

Entrepreneur discusses the important role of water purification in disaster response.

▶ Ed Atchley awoke one morning at 2:00 a.m. with an idea that would eventually affect thousands of people across the world. Unable to sleep, he got up and started sketching a diagram of what would become the world's smallest self-powered, easily-transportable water purifier.

Atchley, who had recently co-founded a direct sales company that sold countertop water purifiers, took his sketch to a friend to help him build a prototype. The system included a power source, pre-filters, custom-designed media container, UV exposure unit and chlorinator.

After a successful demonstration for the Red Cross and other NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), Atchley received a call from an NGO interested in organizing an international relief effort during the first Gulf War with Iraq. Atchley accommodated their request by designing a small trailer-mounted system with a generator. "The system that I quickly put together for that relief effort, we were told, saved thousands of lives," Atchley recalls. Atchley soon thereafter began mass producing the portable devices.

After receiving more interest in his water purifiers from the U.S. military, Atchley decided to leave the direct sales company and start his own NGO, which he called Water for the World. Through Water for the World, Atchley built small dams in Africa, provided sanitation to children in remote areas in northern South Africa and sent 20 Southern Methodist University students to train Kenyan villagers on how to remove parasites from their drinking water. Water for the World was also active in Rwanda, where they partnered with two other NGOs to provide equipment, food, clothing and water systems for refugees.



ATCHLEY



Once just an idea in the middle of the night, Atchley's water purifiers provide a solution to many in need. Photo: Talia Frenkel/American Red Cross.



With the assistance of NGOs such as the Red Cross, Atchley's innovations have been deployed throughout the world. Photo: Bonnie Gillespie/American Red Cross

After six years of doing relief work full-time, Atchley decided it was time to get back in the water business. He founded Aspen Water Inc. in 1999. Currently, Aspen Water supplies the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps with water purification systems. Aspen Water's small ROWPUs, or reverse osmosis water purification units, have been deployed in Afghanistan, the Pacific, Central and South America, Africa and, most recently, Japan.

"During the war with Iraq, we got a call from the Marines on their first day in Fallujah," Atchley recalls. "They said, 'We don't have any water purification systems here and we're concerned about drinking the local water. There's too much enemy fire to bring large support equipment in. Can you help us?' We had three systems waiting outside Fallujah on a delivery truck five days after the request."

In addition to providing water purification systems for the military, Aspen Water also serves state governments, municipalities and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Most notably, the company helped provide drinking water to those displaced following a rash of hurricanes in Florida and even more equipment after Katrina and Rita. "I've been involved in every major international relief effort for the past 25 years in one way or another," Atchley says.

In general, the markets Atchley serves are trending towards more energy-efficient technologies. "Smaller, lighter, less energy — the military has a big push right now for renewable energy and less energy requirements on the battlefield," Atchley explains.

For now, Atchley is no longer having problems sleeping. Demand for his portable water purifiers is at an all-time high and with no sign of decline in the near future, he remains confident in Aspen Water's continued success. "My biggest concern right now is being able to fill all the orders we have," Atchley concludes.

