

Pump it up

When a six-year-old Canadian boy learned that millions of people in Africa were dying for the lack of clean water, he set up a global campaign that's still in full flow six years later. Nathan Greenfield meets Ryan Hreljac in Ottawa

Ryan Hreljac is a busy 12-year-old. He's adjusting to life at high school, where he has won places in the basketball and hockey teams, and has a newly adopted brother called Jimmy to look after. But Ryan, from Kemptville, a small town south of Canada's capital, Ottawa, has other, less ordinary commitments which mean he often has to ask for his homework days in advance - so he can do it on the plane or train or in hotel rooms. For Ryan is a boy on a mission, determined to do something about one of Africa's biggest killers: a shortage of clean drinking water. It is a project that takes him to all corners of the globe, including Uganda, where Jimmy was once his pen pal.

Ryan has met the Pope (in Rome), the television talk show queen Oprah Winfrey (twice), the renowned primatologist Jane Goodall, and princes and princesses from three countries (he joined Prince Charles in laying a wreath at Canada's tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 2001). He has criss-crossed the United States and Canada, and shared his message with political leaders at the Johannesburg summit on sustainable development in 2002, and with 2,000 children honoured for

their contribution to the community at a conference in Florida. He is probably the most successful pre-teen fundraiser on the planet.

Ryan's story begins in January 1998, when his first-grade teacher told his class of six-year-olds that people in Africa were dying because they had no clean water and that just \$70 (£30) would be enough to sink a well and save lives. "I just didn't feel right about that," he recalls in an interview sandwiched into a 45-minute lunch break. "So I went home and asked my mom and dad for \$70. They ignored me at first because I was six.

But after a few days they sat me down and said, 'You know, Ryan, \$70 is a lot of money. We can't just give it to you, but we can give you a chance to do extra chores.'"

After four months of cleaning the house and washing dishes and windows, he had raised the \$70, only to find out when he contacted WaterCan, a Canadian charity that supports sustainable water supplies, that building a well in fact costs \$2,000 (£857).

Undaunted, Ryan took on more chores, but when he reached \$100, he realised he couldn't do it alone, "so I started doing speeches and fundraisers". The first event, at a local Rotary Club, raised several hundred dollars. After Ryan's story was featured in the local newspaper, WaterCan received hundreds of dollars in donations. His story inspired the Canadian International Development Agency to provide matching

funds, and Ryan paid for his first well in autumn 1998. The agency subsequently funded a 50-minute documentary film entitled Ryan's Well.

"I was impressed with what Ryan had done," recalls his mother, Susan, a community development worker. "But when we went to WaterCan's board meeting in September 1998, I felt he had done his bit. While we were there, we heard that drilling Ryan's well by hand would take 20 people more than 10 days. But a gasoline-powered drill that could fit on the back of truck would allow them to drill many more wells. Before we left, Ryan had promised to raise the \$25,000 (£10,700) cost of the drill."

Since then, schools across Canada and the United States have held fundraising events - everything from cake sales and raffles to pig-kissing "dares" and sponsored bike rides - and the Ryan's Well Foundation has raised more than \$800,000 (£343,000), which has paid for more than 70 wells in Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Tanzania.

An estimated 150,000 people now have clean water as a result.

Still a surprisingly shy boy, despite averaging more than 30 public appearances a year, Ryan proudly recalls visiting his first well, at the Community of Anglo school, in northern Uganda's Apac district, in July 2000, when he was nine. He was accompanied by his parents (older brother Jordan, then 11, and younger brother Keegan, seven, stayed at home). Five thousand men, women and children lined the dry dusty road

that led to the well and the district school and chanted his name. Gizaw Shibru, director for Uganda at the Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief (CPAR), a non-profit organisation that encourages health and self-reliance projects in the developing world, told him that people 100 kilometres away knew who he was.

Among the crowd was Jimmy Akana, then 11, who several years earlier had become Ryan's pen pal. Before the well was drilled, Jimmy had to get up every night at midnight to fetch water. "I had to walk eight kilometres there and back carrying a small container, maybe 10 litres," he says. "I had to go back and back again to fill the pot at home. Then I went to school. The water was not clean. It looked like chocolate."

Jimmy later experienced much darker traumas than the burden of the water run, as Ryan's parents discovered on their visit. Like thousands of other children in northern Uganda, he has suffered at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group. The guerrillas have kidnapped thousands of school children, forcing girls into sexual slavery and turning boys into child soldiers, with the alleged aim of setting up a theocratic state based on the Ten Commandments.

"When we we found out he was an orphan - his father had been shot by the LRA and his mother had been abducted - we decided to become Jimmy's legal guardians and make him our fourth son," says Susan.

In October 2002, while waiting for the adoption to go through, Ryan and his family received horrifying news. "We got an email from the CPAR telling us that Jimmy and four of his cousins had been abducted by the LRA. From here in Kemptville we could do nothing but wait and worry."

A few days later they were told that Jimmy had escaped; he had chewed through the ropes that bound him and ran off into the bush. But he had seen two of his cousins shot dead. "Later we learned that Jimmy's two other cousins had also been murdered," Susan says.

Attempts to fly Jimmy to Ottawa last April foundered because of visa problems. Ryan's mother and father petitioned the British high commissions in Uganda and Canada, but to no avail. Jimmy finally made it to Canada thanks to Dr Kevin Chan of the Canadian Society for International Health, who invited him to attend a conference in Vancouver in May.

Since arriving in Canada, Jimmy has been granted refugee status and has attended St Michael's Catholic high school with Ryan and Jordan. Although he says he doesn't speak English well, he achieved 72 per cent on his first mid-term report card, which contributes to his final grade. His favourite subjects are religion and English - and he's the school's top runner. "When I get up, I get dressed and go running for one hour. Then I take a shower and go to school," he says.

Despite his celebrity, Ryan is remarkably level-headed. "The Sunday after he was on Oprah Winfrey's show, we had a family dinner,"

says his father, Mark, a policeman. "Instead of talking about being on TV, all Ryan wanted to talk about was that his hockey team, which had voted him assistant captain, had won the league championship."

He insists he is a "regular kid", but Ryan has a rare ability to inspire, and an unusual ambition: to become a water engineer. In November, when he picked up a university scholarship worth nearly \$20,000 (£10,000) from World of Children, an Ohio-based organisation, in recognition of his charity work, he offered to share it with the runner-up, who had been helping disabled children. His gesture prompted the sponsor, Cardinal Health, to stump up a full second award.

Ryan believes that children can change the world: "Anyone can do anything.

It doesn't matter who you are."

Meanwhile Jimmy, who has already faced things no child should have to experience, has his own inner mountains to climb. "When Jimmy first came here, he didn't understand why telling his story was important to Ryan's work," says Susan. "Now he realises that telling how he had to walk miles for water helps people in the developed world understand the situation and appreciate the clean water we have. Every time he says grace, he prays for peace and clean water for Africa."

Ryan's Foundation: www.ryanswell.ca. For film clips go to www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/index.htm and search for Ryan's Well

HOW THE WORLD COULD GET WELL

Before Ryan's well was built at his school in Uganda, Jimmy Akana was one of the 1.1 billion people around the world who have no access to clean water.

Around 2.5 billion people also lack adequate sanitation, a major cause of drinking water contamination and sickness. Every day, more than 25,000 people die from water-borne diseases. Almost one in three deaths in the developing world is caused by contaminated water.

Diarrhoea kills 2.2 million people every year; 500 million people are at risk of contracting and 6 million are blinded by trachoma, caused by water-borne bacteria; 200 million people are infected by and 20 million suffer from schistosomiasis (bilharzia) caused by parasitic worms in water; and more than 150 million suffer and hundreds of thousands die from dysentery, typhoid and cholera.

There are two common low-maintenance ways that aid agencies can provide clean drinking water. It can be piped - which guards against soiling - from existing springs, often by using gravity on slopes. Where this is not possible, as in Jimmy's village, a well can be drilled and capped by a hand-pump. Simple sanitation improvements include upgrading hand-dug latrine pits and providing robust latrine buildings to prevent seepage into water sources.

