In 2016, Jennifer Fussell, executive director at World Water Relief, faced the same life-threatening natural disaster as the people her organization serves: a hurricane. Hurricane Matthew was expected to touch down in Haiti before barreling toward the Georgia coast and her St. Simons home. “The great equalizer,” she calls it. Unlike the tiny villages and bateyes (sugar mill settlements) in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, she could prepare her home, her family, and her drinking water. “The benefit for us is that we know it’s coming,” Jennifer explains. “You know you can move your things, but down there, they can’t. There’s nothing they can do; there’s nowhere to run; there’s nowhere to hide.”

What comes to mind when you think of the word “source”? Chances are you picture images and hear sounds of water. Maybe you see a waterfall you admired on a hike through the Appalachian foothills, or perhaps you hear the trickle of a shallow neighborhood brook, or the massive collapses of Gulf Coast waves. For most Americans, water is a plentiful resource, and we may not even think twice about it. It’s abundant in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, and even in our refrigerator doors. Barring unexpected disasters, it’s always running and always available. However, in Hispaniola—just over 700 miles from Miami—that’s not the case.

As a brief geography refresher, Hispaniola is made up of Haiti to the west and the Dominican Republic to the east. With roughly 10 million people in each of its countries, it is the second largest, and most populous, island in the Caribbean. Despite a booming tourism industry, the island is largely riddled with poverty, which continues from generation to generation.

Knowing her home and her beloved Hispaniola were in the path of the storm, Jennifer also knew World Water Relief’s filtration systems that the communities had come to rely on could be compromised. But her team of seven—four Dominicans, two Haitians, and one American—ensured the systems’ safety and security, even in the harshest conditions. “They just keep going. Even when we say, ‘Hunker down and keep yourself safe,’ they want to be sure that the systems are working, so they’re out there as soon as it’s safe to do so.”

After all, World Water Relief’s tagline is, “Water is life.” And for the estimated 60,000 people the filtration systems serve, the motto is more than a catchphrase—it’s a matter of life and death. According to World Water Relief, there are more than 840,000 water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems in place throughout the Caribbean, providing clean water and sanitation to millions of people every day. But for many, including those affected by Hurricane Matthew, the challenge is to keep the systems working through unexpected disasters.

Purchase any Gunners Daughter product featuring the GD Hispaniola map and 10% of the proceeds will be donated to World Water Relief. Visit their website at gunners-daughter.com/hispaniola.
and hygiene-related deaths each year. Thankfully, “by the largest stroke of luck,” no systems were damaged or became inoperable during Hurricane Matthew.

The magnitude of the water crisis came to Jennifer’s attention through her husband, Kevin. As a bright-eyed pulmonary and critical care physician fresh out of training, Kevin found himself pulled toward different medical humanitarians organizations. Traveling with a medical team to the Dominican Republic in 2006, and making a return visit in 2007, he realized he was devoting a lot of time to treating waterborne parasitic illnesses. He knew if he could get to the source—the water—he could make a change. And World Water Relief was born.

Today, over a decade later, Kevin and 22 other passionate individuals keep World Water Relief and its 30 filtration systems throughout Hispaniola operating. The mission is simple but the task challenging: provide safe, filtered water and education to the students and communities in the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

At the crux of the mission is WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) education, because without intentional, structured guidance, World Water Relief’s work and safe drinking water become null. “It’s really one of the reasons I think we are so successful in eradicating waterborne illness. The true mechanism for change is children because they’re little sponges; they take it all in,” says Jennifer. Through lessons and extracurricular activities like Club Agua, World Water Relief team members teach students the benefits of hand washing, sanitation, and safe drinking water. They offer engaging lessons while hosting friendly competitions and quizzing pupils to measure retention. World Water Relief is constantly monitoring its impact on the students and on the surrounding communities as well. And it’s working.

“The people are appreciative. They can see the benefits in their health. It helps them break the cycle of poverty because when they’re not sick, they can go to work, or they can stay in school, and that helps them further down the line. It’s allowed us to increase the impact we have.” That’s why starting at the source has become the key to World Water Relief’s mission. As they paddle through the challenging currents of poverty, government red tape, fundraising, and disease, undeniable results and passion for the local people keep them afloat.  

To find out how you can get involved, visit worldwaterrelief.org.