



Saudek, '69: Harnessing Solar Energy to Light Up Liberia

By Lori Atherton

In a country where most homes lack electricity, “kids can’t study, businesses can’t operate, people can’t do their work at home,” says Robert Saudek, ‘69.

That’s why he is working with the Liberian Energy Network (LEN) to bring solar lights to one of the poorest countries in the world.

Saudek is the vice president, treasurer, and director of LEN, a nonprofit organization founded by Richard Fahey, a retired environmental lawyer from Ohio and former Peace Corps volunteer who served in Liberia in the 1960s. The two met in 2011, when both were fellows of Harvard University’s Advanced Leadership Initiative, a program that helps late-career or retired professionals apply their leadership skills toward addressing social problems.

“What appealed to me about LEN is that there is a serious need for electricity in Liberia; houses just go dark at night,” says Saudek, a founder and retired managing partner of Morris, Manning & Martin, LLP, one of Atlanta’s largest law firms. “And yet, there is a solution—these solar lights, which are portable and not terribly expensive.”

Like many Third World countries, Liberia is struggling to rebuild its infrastructure, particularly its electric grid, following more than a decade of civil war, which ended in 2003. While some businesses and some affluent Liberians use generators, most of the country’s poorer inhabitants are forced to rely on firewood, candlelight, or kerosene lamps to light their homes and businesses after sundown.

Saudek made his first visit to Liberia in May to work on the distribution of LEN’s first shipment of 200 solar lights. Another order of 540 lights already has been placed, and a third shipment is expected to reach Liberia later in the year. The goal, he says, is to have 2,000 solar lights delivered to Liberia in the first year of LEN’s existence.

LEN sells the lights in its retail shop in the capital of Monrovia, as well as through partner organizations, such as the Ganta Methodist Mission Hospital, Advanced Youth Project, and the Christ Network for Good, charging only enough for the lights to offset the cost of manufacturing, shipping, and other operational expenses.

“There is a trend in the social enterprise world not to give things away, but rather to create revenue to the extent necessary to break even and try to make it affordable to the people you are trying to reach,” Saudek says. “It’s basically a break-even, nonprofit model.”

Several sizes and types of solar lights are available; the smallest is a reading light, which costs about \$17, while the largest (more than \$500) is capable of lighting a hospital

ward. Another model, roughly the size of a portable flashlight, sells for \$62 and has the ability to charge cell phones, which have become popular in Liberia in recent years, but are expensive to charge considering the average Liberian makes 52 cents a day.

“The cell phone phenomenon is inconsistent with a country that has too little money,” Saudek says, “and yet five or so years ago, people started buying cell phones. It’s really the only way people can stay in touch and operate over there. But there is a cost to charge cell phones; you have to go to cell-phone charging centers, and that costs \$40 to \$50 per year. Most of our solar lights not only will provide lighting for the purchasers but also will allow the purchasers to save the cost of charging their cell phones, and will provide opportunities for the purchasers to generate income by charging their friends and neighbors to charge their cell phones on the solar light.”

Providing a solution to Liberia’s energy needs, as well as seeing how receptive Liberians are to using solar energy, is fulfilling for Saudek, who considers his work with LEN to be a new career.

“It’s been a wonderful development to have a second career of this type,” Saudek says. “Taking on something that’s consequential and challenging and doing good for people who are in severe need has been a great thing for me. I would encourage other lawyers at this stage of their careers to look into doing something like this. They won’t regret it.”

For more information on the Liberian Energy Network, visit lightingliberia.org.

