



The Best and Brightest

What I am about to discuss will fill you with confidence about water's future. I recently sat down with AWWA's summer interns to gauge their understanding of the water sector. Two of them recently graduated from the University of Colorado Boulder (one with a bachelor's degree and the other a doctorate degree), and the other two are midway through their master's programs at CU Boulder.

I was interested in understanding whether they viewed the internship as simply a summer job or if they were serious about water. Both Bihu Suchetana and Saranya Balu grew up in India and spoke passionately about how, by growing up in a developing country, they know firsthand what it is like to not have water. Bihu told me she "saw the impacts on a population that did not have safe water" and that "water can fundamentally change the way people live." Saranya echoed these sentiments, adding that "water practices in India are not sustainable, and they can benefit from more experts."

Adam West grew up in Atlanta, Ga., and Catherine Bacon in Tampa, Fla. Adam observed that "people take water for granted, and that dictates how they use it," while Catherine stressed that "there is a need for water everywhere, and it is critical to public health."

When I asked each of them what they saw as a large future challenge facing water, Bihu, Saranya, and Catherine immediately spoke about climate change and the uncertainty it presents for water, especially for developing countries that have scarce water supplies and growing populations. Adam added that increased pressure on water resources will result in shifts of how we use and value water in the future.

I also asked about their experiences with water as they were growing up. Bihu spoke about what she called the "primary concerns for the ages," which are the need to have enough water (India rivers often dry up in the summer) and, secondarily, the ability to make water safe. She and Saranya both had storage tanks outside of their homes in India because water was delivered only two hours a day. Saranya also

shared that when she was young, there were times when they would have to bathe using a bucket. Neither of them drank water from the tap in India, but they do in Boulder.

Catherine and Adam did not grow up concerned about water's availability or quality; both remarked that it was always available. Both, however, spoke about how water had impacts on their communities. Catherine spoke of the importance of the state's efforts to restore the natural flow of the Everglades and how these efforts intersect with nature and the economy. Adam discussed the significant capital investments being made to solve Atlanta's combined sewer overflow challenges.

Although these future water professionals come from dramatically different backgrounds, it is interesting how their paths all now intersect with the goal of making a better world through better water. All four hope to have careers in the water sector, and they agree that working at AWWA has strengthened their desire to do so. Adam's goals focus on working with utilities on sustainable practices that address protecting the environment and improving energy management. He points out that the need for new water professionals is difficult to ignore and important to our future because of the risks from an aging workforce.

Bihu plans a career in water to positively affect people's lives so that they can be happy and healthy. Her humanitarian objectives are reinforced by her scientific and statistical rigor as demonstrated in her PhD thesis, which focused on wastewater quality and nutrient management. She says of her time at AWWA that "it has strengthened my resolve to remain in the water community for my entire career."

Catherine feels that "water provides a meaningful career choice" where she can "use [her] STEM background to solve real-world challenges." She would like to work for a larger municipality or consulting firm where she can continue to learn by being exposed to the broad aspects of water, the environment, and engineering. In the short time she has been at AWWA, Catherine says, "I am learning things about water that were not even on my radar before."

Saranya is focused on her desire to help manage water resources and support sustainable practices as an environmental engineer. She feels that, globally, "people still have not fully felt the importance of water as a whole, and that proper management is necessary for survival." As to her AWWA experience she says, "I have always thought water was important, but working at AWWA and meeting the industry leaders reinforces what I thought."

When I asked our four interns what they would do if they had my job, the following response rang true the loudest: "Make sure the best and brightest minds are interested in water careers." I could not agree more, and this summer, AWWA has done just that!

Meet AWWA's Interns

Catherine Bacon: BS degree in environmental engineering; hometown is Tampa, Fla.

Saranya Balu: MS degree in environmental engineering; hometown is Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Bihu Suchetana: PhD degree in civil engineering; hometown is Durgapur, West Bengal, India

Adam West: MS degree in civil and environmental engineering; hometown is Atlanta, Ga.

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