

# Community Activist Jim Burchell '80 Continues to Give Back

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Thursday, February 27, 2014

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Jim Burchell at a ribbon cutting ceremony for a water project that brought piped potable water to homes in a Regadio neighborhood for the first time since the people started living there 80 years ago. Previously people used women who had to carry water from a long distance in 5 gallon buckets several times a day.

UNH connected with Jim Burchell '80 when he won an iPad in a recent contest that encouraged alumni to join the university's new online community, [UNH Connect](#). Not only was he the university's first Truman Scholar, but Burchell attended UNH while also serving as a Rochester (N.H.) city councilor and a New Hampshire state representative. And he worked two 12-hour shifts at a local manufacturer every weekend tending a furnace.

It might have always been about making a difference, but Burchell's time at UNH wasn't all work and no play. He recalled fondly memories of contra dances in the university barns, campus campaign visits by Ted Kennedy and Jerry Brown, summers as a lifeguard at Hampton Beach, and lots of good pizza and beer in downtown Durham.

He attributes his early activism to things that were happening in the bigger world – the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights struggle, and the move to change the voting age to 18 – as well as what was happening in his own backyard.

When Burchell moved back to New Hampshire there was a concerted effort underway to get new and younger people in the legislature. Working closely with Secretary of State Bill Gardner he was elected in 1976 and served three two-year terms. At the same time the city he grew up in, Rochester, was under the control of a mayor he felt was not acting in the best interests of the city. Winning by just 13 votes, Burchell was elected to the Rochester City Council in 1977 for one four-year term.

"I was not a very good public speaker but I'm a good organizer," Burchell said. "I started to work with people in the community, in the neighborhoods to address their concerns and we got a new mayor elected." Burchell lives in New Jersey now where he is the founder and director of PeaceWorks, a nonprofit organization that works to aid the peoples of the Americas, particularly Nicaragua, and support progressive change in our nation. This work is a continuation of his time in Michigan right after graduating from UNH. He earned his master's in public policy from the University of Michigan and helped to organize a referendum campaign expressing opposition to then President Reagan's policies in Central America. The successful vote and a sister city relationship with the community of Juigalpa in Nicaragua led to a lifelong commitment to giving back. Since then he has directly or indirectly organized the shipment of more than 250 cargo shipments of humanitarian aid to Nicaragua.

[PeaceWorks](#) was started to continue and expand his work. In addition to shipping humanitarian aid, the program provides educational programs and raises money for development programs -- \$140,000 last year, their best year ever.

"I'm very fortunate," said Burchell of the opportunity to work at what he loves. "We've made these personal and professional relationships that help to put a human face on global warming, promote the sale of fair trade, and focus on the plight of street children. On a micro level we're able to help people, and on a macro level we inform even more people. It's not a one-way street when you do this kind of work. It's not selfless. You gain a lot."

- WRITTEN BY:

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