

Thirsting For Hope

Pictures Of African Drought Raise Awareness, Money

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By ADRIAN BRUNE Special To The Courant

As they look to the skies for relief, the famished and thirsty people of Niger's Azawak province -- which has been described as the poorest region of the poorest country in the world -- often say a little prayer, "Amman Imman, Ar Issudarr" or "Water is life, milk is hope."

Amman Imman is the name of photographer/researcher Ariane Alzhara Kirtley's effort to help bring clean water to Azawak.

Kirtley, raised for much of her life in Niger, wants to raise hope in one of the poorest provinces in that African nation by bringing it clean water.

The people of the Azawak province "can spend up to nine months without a single shower," Kirtley said. "I brought...water and soap during my last visit in January, and the entire camp rejoiced because they were able to bathe for the first time since September in preparation for the Tabaski festivities."

During the province's nine-month dry season, young women must travel 35 miles to one of the two wells just to bring back drinking water, and only one of the wells works regularly. The women usually bring back about 60 liters of water for their family per trip - less than 6 liters of water per person per day. The World Health Organization recommends a minimum 25 liters of water per person, per day.

"Even then, there is no guarantee that [they'll] find water there, because these wells also are prone to drying up," said Mustapha Alkassoum, Kirtley's research assistant, in a letter about the situation. "Sometimes entire villages are abandoned during the nine-month dry season because everyone goes in search for water."

By exhibiting her photos from Niger, Kirtley - whose parents were National Geographic photographers - aims to raise \$250,000 to dig wells over underground streams. To date, she has raised about \$122,000 and plans on making another push across Connecticut in the next month. She hopes to hire contractors in Niger in November to start work on the first two wells.

The wells, she explains, will help stabilize the province enough that international relief organizations, including CARE and Oxfam, might consider programs there. Long abandoned by government and aid organizations - largely because they could not guarantee basic needs of employees - the roughly 500,000 people in the Azawak province live in an arid region on the edge of the Sahara.

"The area of Azawak is quite vast and undeveloped, making it extremely complicated and extremely expensive to ship supplies and run projects in the region," said Seth Thomas, a spokesman for CARE International in Niger. "Because villages are so remote, just the cost of gas spent on transporting people and equipment/supplies can outweigh the cost of the actual supplies."

Kirtley learned young about the power of photographs and thought it might be the means to raising the money needed for the wells.

Her snapshots showed smiling children playfully pulling gnats off each other at the end of their long searches for water; young women cradling their babies sipping from large bowls of dirty water; and a community still enthusiastically poised to celebrate tribal festivities with all the kaleidoscopic decorum of African tradition.

In Kirtley's mind, all were emblematic of the resolve, graciousness and love of life that marks Azawak culture.

"These were people who, no matter how little they had, constantly showered me with kindness - they would give me their last glass of drinking water," says Kirtley, whose own rail-thin body evinces the ravages of dysentery, parasites and other illnesses born of Niger's unclean water. "I don't think loneliness is a word in their vocabulary. People there are hungry; they're not lonely."

Although Kirtley lived in Niger for about a decade and thought she knew it well, she said she was shocked by conditions in Azawak when she was persuaded to visit the province by an interpreter she worked with on another project. The situation "blew me away. I thought I knew about water problems in Niger. I had no idea."

There she saw that even during the three-month rainy season, while the men travel sometimes as far as 300 miles south in search of water for their large camel and cow herds, families send their young daughters to find water in dirty ponds, where animals and people have

bathed. They usually return with a buckets full or water the consistency of hot chocolate.

Kirtley was brought to Niger at the age of 6 months and lived there for a decade. The 26-year-old, who earned her graduate degree from Yale School of Public Health in 2004, had worked the previous summer in Niger for CARE on an international breastfeeding promotion initiative. After graduation she returned, with a Fulbright grant, to study hygiene and sanitation.

Kirtley's father, Michael Kirtley of New Haven, described his daughter as "hard-headed...so I think she'll make it. Whether she makes it or not, I'm proud of her effort trying to change the inequities of the world." He said his daughter must have learned "something from her mother and me" about shining a light on inequities with images. Kirtley, who has photographed for National Geographic, Newsweek and Paris-Match, has since founded the Friendship Caravan to promote relations between Western and Muslim nations.

Ariane Kirtley firmly believes that the wells are the crucial first step if the region is to attract the help of relief agencies. Convincing those agencies might prove more difficult than digging the wells.

"I don't believe there is much in the way of infrastructure development (water, health) that will be implemented any time soon in the Azawak area," said Thomas, of CARE International in Niger. "However, there are free food supplies given to the most vulnerable areas that will take place in certain locations in the Azawak zone.

"These distributions are just to ease the food insecurity before the harvest and not a long-term solution at all."

Kirtley remains undeterred. "...other regions of Niger were also at one point remote before organizations and the government went in and started bringing infrastructure, and now these areas have become progressively more accessible.

"Hopefully the project will help change this type of attitude because Amman Imman will help make these populations slightly more accessible."

Kirley will present her photographs at the Essex Rotary Club on Sept. 26.

More information on Amman Imman can be found at waterforniger.org.



Mother & Son
(ARIANE ALZHARA KIRTLEY)



Gathering Water
(ARIANE ALZHARA
KIRTLEY)



Contaminated
Water
(ARIANE ALZHARA
KIRTLEY)



Ariane Alzhara
Kirtley
(ARIANE ALZHARA
KIRTLEY)