

Photographs at a local gallery tell the tale of a village in Niger where the people must walk up to 30 miles each day to find water

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Walking 30 miles a day might sound like a long distance normally, but in many parts of the world, it is the norm because it's the only way to get water for the family.

"Amman Imman: Water is Life, the photography of Ariane Alzhara Kirtley," is the latest show on display at Murphy Arts, at Keene's Colony Mill Marketplace.

The photos show people who live in the Azawak valley in Africa's Sahara Desert, an arid plain larger than the state of Florida, populated by 500,000 nomads who have no choice but to travel in search of drinking water nine months of the year. It is the poorest region of Niger, which is considered the poorest nation in the world.

Born in the U.S. to National Geographic journalist parents, Kirtley lived in North and West Africa until she was 10, among such groups as nomadic fishermen in Mali and Muslims in central Nigeria. In 2003, she worked on a CARE International breastfeeding promotion initiative in Niger and received a master's degree in public health at Yale University the following year. She returned to Niger that same year, this time as a Fulbright scholar, to implement a hygiene and sanitation initiative. It was then, while she was conducting surveys throughout the nation, that she found out about the water shortage in the Azawak.

She first had to get permission from regional officials to conduct her research. "They all said, 'Please take note of the water problem (in the Azawak),' " Kirtley said from her home in France during a recent interview with The Sentinel. "I told them, 'I'm not here to help.' "

She also didn't believe how serious it was until she stayed in the Azawak valley for a month in the fall of 2005. During her time there, she traveled from village to village and stayed with different families, and what she learned was an eye-opening experience.

The Azawak valley's inhabitants have no access to roads or schools, and health centers are a two-day donkey ride away. Once ponds that form during the three-month rainy season dry up, the people of the Azawak dig holes for ground water, which last from a couple weeks to a couple months. It's when those holes also dry up that inhabitants need to go searching for wells — sometimes an entire village will be abandoned during the dry season. Little girls as young as 9-years old travel many miles to get to the nearest source of water, and when they return home, there's a good chance their young siblings will have died. Half of the children born in the Azawak die before age five, one-quarter of them from dehydration.

Even when people travel all day to find water, there's no guarantee water will be in the wells. When it is, it's often dirtier than a mud puddle in New York City, as stated on Kirtley's Water For Niger Web site.

Kirtley visited one village where inhabitants had dug a well the length of a football field. "Donkeys were trying to pull up a gallon of water the color of mud," she said, water that was taken home to a family of seven.

The Azawak valley, she soon found out, is Niger's only region where people can't access clean water. Everywhere else in Niger, she said, people are in dire circumstances but there are government organizations that offer help. Plus, in those regions, each village has at least two wells and often a borehole (deep closed well) with a hand pump.



Clean water is available in the Azawak, in aquifers at an average depth of 650 to 1,300 feet. Because water is available, Kirtley decided to take matters into her own hands. She started Amman Imman (translated: “Water is Life”), a program of the U.S. non-profit organization, The Friendship Caravan, to raise funds for drilling permanent sources of water in the Azawak.

So far, Amman Imman, based in Washington, D.C., is the only organization digging wells in the Azawak. Last summer, the organization dug its first borehole — 600 feet below the earth’s surface. It now serves the needs of 25,000 people and their animals.

Kirtley’s goal in establishing permanent water sources is to use them as a catalyst to generate aid for the region from humanitarian organizations, primarily food, health care and education.

“You can’t let 500,000 people try to survive without water,” Kirtley said. “That just shouldn’t exist in today’s world. There’s definitely enough resources and money (out there).”

Since she founded Amman Imman, donations have come in and volunteers have joined the organization from all over the world, including committee members who maintain the borehole in the Azawak. It is now in partnership with 50 Montessori schools that are raising money and awareness, and Kirtley has spoken to many groups about the program, including several churches and at a conference attended by a representation of 500 schools.

Inspired by her photojournalist parents, Kirtley took photographs during her breastfeeding initiative in Niger five years ago to illustrate her work. Back then, she had no intention of using them as part of a fundraising effort. This time, she decided it would be a useful way to record her experiences in the Azawak, and to raise money for Amman Imman.

“It’s great to do photography as a humanitarian effort,” she said, because pictures give a face to a cause. “It brings to light we’re working with individuals.”

Enough money has been raised to build a second borehole, and Kirtley said there’s no limit to how many can be built, so the program will exist indefinitely.

She and Amman Imman team members will go back to Niger in November to do some monitoring and evaluation of the well and a feasibility study of future well sites. The hope is that the second will be finished by early next year.

Kirtley vowed she would only tell stories of the beauty of the people she photographed rather than stories of their pain. She says physically and emotionally, they are strong, for example. . She saw people using their hands to dig those football-field-sized wells. “They fight for their survival,” she said, “They’re not sitting around waiting ... They don’t have the luxury of being sad.” Because they have strong religious beliefs, Kirtley said, they view their situation as God’s will, and the simplicity of their lives keeps them happy and smiling.

Despite their conditions, she said the people she met were the most generous she’d ever seen and would gladly offer her their last cup of water for the day. Although she’s a vegetarian, Kirtley said one of her hosts walked 20 miles round-trip to find a goat to feed her.

“Everything in their environment is fighting against them,” she said, “and they give you everything they can possibly give you. It’s a true example of kindness, of honor, of resilience.”

(Article originally published in The New Hampshire Keene Sentinel print edition entitled Water is life.)