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Photographer refocuses attention on a simple necessity: drinking water

Randall Beach, New Haven Register Columnist

Ariane Alzhara Kirtley thought she had seen the poorest people on Earth during her travels in Africa. But then she discovered the people of the Azawak region of Niger, who often simply have no drinking water.

After living among these people for three months — and seeing some of them needlessly die — Kirtley has put on hold her photography career and is working full time to raise money for a well-building project.

Kirtley returned from Niger with a collection of her evocative photos, on exhibit at the New Haven Free Public Library, 133 Elm St. The title: "Water is Life."

Kirtley spent her childhood in Niger, so she has a natural affinity for its people. It was the Africans she met as an infant who gave her the middle name Alzhara, meaning "the flower who blossoms in the desert."

"It also means 'luck,'" she said with a big smile Thursday at the library.

"I do feel lucky," she said. "I've already been able to raise \$28,000. But I still have a long way to go." (Her goal is \$250,000, the cost of building two deep wells.)

Kirtley moved to Niger when she was 6 months old because her parents, Michael and Aubine Kirtley, were photojournalists working for National Geographic magazine. She lived there until she was 12.

Kirtley received an anthropology degree from Yale College in 2001 and a master's degree from the Yale School of Public Health in 2004. Then she landed a Fulbright Scholarship to return to Niger and do public health research. After her Fulbright research assistant asked her to go to the Azawak region, Kirtley's eyes were opened to the worst poverty she had ever encountered. Humanitarian groups such as CARE will not venture into that area, Kirtley said, because CARE officials are hesitant to send staffers to a region with such a limited water supply.

The Azawak population numbers about 500,000 and many of them are nomadic. In rural areas, which comprise 99 percent of the Azawak, there are no roads, no schools and no health centers. Last year, in the district where Kirtley was living and working, 25 percent of the children under age 5 died because they had no water to drink, she said.

"Every day, children as young as 7 or 8 walk up to 35 miles round trip to find water," she said. "The parents have



Ariane Alzhara Kirtley in traditional Tuareg garb. Photo by Aubine Kirtley

to take care of the animals (livestock)." During the rainy season, Kirtley noted, the people drink contaminated water from ponds. When she visited, she limited her stays to one month because she always got sick from the food. She drank her own water; she brought a month's supply, sharing cups with her hosts.

As poor as these people are, she said, "They welcomed me. I was showered with little gifts they had made, such as leather pouches. They walked 10 miles to get a goat and killed it so I would have meat.



Againakou, 18, gives her son, Agoulbouley, 10 months, a drink of water at a camp in the Azawak plains in Niger, West Africa. *Photo by Ariane Alzhara Kirtley*

"What I want people to understand," Kirtley said, "is that these people I'm trying to help are extremely hard-working and courageous. They are generous, beautiful people that need a little help to live." She said in the area she was working, 10 children died last year because they drank dirty water. And several months ago, "a good friend of mine died in child labor because she couldn't ride a donkey." (It is a two-day donkey ride to the nearest medical center.)

"It was completely preventable," Kirtley said of her friend's death. "And this happens all the time. All the time.

"I consider these people my children, my family," she said. "And they're dying." The public appears to be drawn to these photos of smiling people working to survive, to get water. Connie Taylor, a security guard at the library, was watching Dennis Hamilton put up the photos Wednesday, and she was stunned by the exhibit.

"This is amazing," she said. "I can't believe they don't have water. But their clothing and their braids are beautiful."

Kirtley is working through the Friendship Caravan, based in Washington, D.C., to raise funds for those wells. People wishing to donate should make out their checks to the Friendship Caravan and mail them to The Friendship Caravan, Project Water is Life, 1211 S. Eads St., Suite 2101, Arlington, Va. 22202.

Kirtley's exhibit will be up until June 15 in the lower level of the library. The library is, regretfully, closed Fridays and Sundays. But it is open Mondays from noon to 8 p.m., Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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