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# AMMAN IMMAN :

Amanda Nagele interviews ASP alumnae Ariane Kirtley Alzhara '96

*I had the pleasure of meeting Ariane Kirtley Alzhara '96 during her recent visit to ASP this July. When I asked Ariane where she currently lives, she replied, "Between the USA, France, and Africa". I was naturally curious to know what type of work had her hop across three continents. I soon learned that Ariane is the Founder and Executive Director of Amman Imman, a non-profit organization whose name means "Water is Life" in the language of the Azawak people - a group of nearly 500,000 inhabitants who live in one of the poorest regions of West Africa located halfway between Mali and Niger. I had the opportunity to interview Ariane and learn more about her organization and how she is bringing life to a region that suffers nine months out of the year from a sheer lack of water.*

**Ariane, tell me a bit about your family background. Where did you grow up as a child?**

I was born in the United States to a French mother and an American father. At the age of 6 months, my family moved to Africa where we stayed until I was 12 years old. My parents were freelance photojournalists for various publications – Geo, National Geographic, Time, Paris Match. It was really thanks to their work

that my brother and I had the opportunity to grow up in Africa. We lived in Mali, Niger, Ivory Coast, Gambia, and Algeria. We spent most of our childhood in Niger; this is where I consider my home.

**How was growing up in Africa for you?**

I loved it. When we were in Africa, we lived in the bush with the native people. It was hard of course. I suffered from the heat and we moved around quite a bit

from place to place. The instability was difficult as a child. I was home-schooled and it was hard to have any close friends. But I always loved it. It was all I knew. I remember the first time I saw New York City, I asked my parents, 'Is this Abidjan?'

**How did you come to Paris and attend ASP?**

When I was 12 years old, my family and I moved back to the United States. We lived in Kentucky for a few years and then I decided to move to France to live with my mother. I joined ASP my junior year and graduated from there. I met some of my best friends at ASP. Although my classmates didn't live in the bush in Africa, they had a sense of internationalism to which we could all relate. I didn't feel like an outsider at ASP. Everyone was very welcoming, nonjudgmental, and accepting of who I was and where I came from. I particularly remember Milty, Ms Vincens, Mr Von Ascheberg, Mr Green, Mr Miller, and Ms Gardshore. They taught me to believe in myself and they motivated me to apply to some of the top universities in the United States. I would have never aspired to do that without their support.

**Where did you go after graduating from ASP?**

I attended Yale University and got my undergraduate degree in Medical Anthropology in 2001. I then attended





# WATER IS LIFE



Mariama drinking plentiful and clean water from the Tangarwashane borehole (July 07)

Yale School of Public Health and received my Masters degree in Public Health in 2004. It was while I was a public health student I traveled to Niger to work as an intern with CARE International, a leading humanitarian organization. After I graduated from the Yale School of Public Health, I obtained a Fulbright Scholarship, for which I spent all of 2005 traveling across Niger studying the variations among different ethnic groups concerning health behavior, knowledge and resources.

#### What inspired you to create Amman Imman?

While I was in Niger conducting research,

"I found an amazing region that was completely unknown."

I had a research assistant who was a native of a region called the Azawak, and he proposed that we visit this area. I had never heard of the Azawak before except for some rumors that is was 'quite dangerous and filled with bandits'. At first I was a little reluctant but then decided that it could be interesting for my research. While visiting the most remote parts of the Azawak (a region that is roughly the size of the state of Florida), I found an amazing region that was completely unknown to Niger and the rest of the world. Before seeing the Azawak, I had already visited some of the poorest parts of Niger (which is the poorest country in the world), but I was astonished by the dire conditions I

witnessed here. I saw children traveling up to 30 kilometers a day each way in temperatures as high as 125 degrees Fahrenheit searching for water. The children would return with cups full of mud. I soon learned that my visit to the Azawak fell during the rainy season when muddy water was more plentiful. The Azawak people explained to me that as soon as the rainy season ends, there won't even be mud to drink. I returned to the Azawak region a few months later to witness for myself how such a terrible situation could worsen. With the end of the rainy season, the muddy marshes dried up to dust and I saw a population of over 500,000 people suffer from not just a lack of clean water, but a sheer and utter lack of water period.





## Was your immediate reaction to create an NGO to help bring water to the Azawak people?

No, I had no intention of creating my own organization. When I visited the Azawak region I was astounded by the horrible conditions these people were living in, but I was also shocked that I saw absolutely no one helping these people. I had never seen an area in Niger being completely ignored. So I first went to CARE International with my findings and they too were absolutely blown away and were interested to see what could be done to help. They hired me to put together a grant proposal; however, our proposal to construct one borehole (\$175,000) was rejected. Funders tend to prefer to dig many shallow open wells for the cost of one borehole. The problem with these types of wells in the Azawak is that they cannot be dug deep enough to reach the sustainable aquifers, and so they either never reach water or dry up prematurely. Underground water in the Azawak is abundant and pristine, but can only be reached at depths ranging between 200 and 800 meters (600 to 1200 feet).

## Why do you think the Azawak people have been ignored?

The Azawaks are a nomadic people and often times NGOs find nomads to be too difficult to help. Some may think that the Azawaks should relocate to an area where water does exist, but you cannot relocate half a million people without causing a political crisis. If they leave the country, they are considered refugees. If you move them out of the country, they are considered internally displaced persons and they will eventually have to move back from where they came. Since there is no assistance, the Azawak people are constantly trying to help themselves. For instance, one village that I saw has spent the past six years digging a well; it is now 100 meters deep and they still have yet to hit water.

## What happened after your grant proposal was rejected?

During this time, while I was preparing the grant proposal, a dear friend of mine among the Azawak people had passed away during childbirth because she was too ill to ride a donkey for two days to the nearest health center. After this personal loss, I knew that I could not ignore this situation and I needed to do something to help. Around this same time, I received an

Ariane with children from camp Teckniwen (Jan 06)



unsolicited donation from a family friend totaling \$120,000 which covered nearly 70% of the cost to construct one borehole. This donation gave me the means to have a dream to bring water to the Azawak people. This was the start of Amman Imman.

" I live with the people; we are family. They need our help desperately. "

## What were some of the major obstacles you faced when starting Amman Imman?

The first obstacle was the financial challenge. We needed to fundraise but this was of course difficult because no one had ever heard of Amman Imman or the Azawak. We needed to educate people and gain standing as an organization before donors would invest in our mission. I also needed to learn quite a

bit about how to deal with water issues, how to acquire the proper construction permits, how to handle the intense heat and difficult health conditions, and of course, the issue of corruption. What I learned from my graduate program, however, is that when you are establishing a public health program, you

must remain open and listen carefully to the needs and wants of the people. The fact that Amman Imman is a small organization, we have the ability to stay close with the people and live among them in order to fully understand their needs. We are also able to ensure our work continues to provide relief through constant follow-up with management training and maintenance. One borehole can last 50-100 years if it is properly maintained.

## What is the overall mission of Amman Imman and what are the short and long-term goals of the organization?

The overall mission of Amman Imman is to provide abundant and clean water to the Azawak region. We completed our first borehole in January 2007 and it is now providing clean water to nearly 25,000 people and their livestock. We are on schedule to begin drilling a second borehole in November of this year. Our long term goal is to drill 70-100 boreholes in the next ten years along with providing proper training, maintenance, and follow-up. The phrase Amman Imman means



Soldering a sign onto the Tangarwashne water tower (July 07)



Malik, Soutout and Raichatou digging for water (Jan 06)

'Water is Life'. When you bring a borehole to a community, you are bringing water to that community, and with water everything else will come. The Azawaks are beginning to experience that. Water allows you grow your own food; water allows you to build an adobe home; water allows a family to stay clean and avoid disease; water allows children to spend their day at school rather than skimming through muddy marshes; water attracts other NGOs to invest in the region – to build schools and health centers, set-up food relief programs, and combat the environmental degradation of the region.

**Describe the reactions from local community members and other NGOs to Amman Imman's work.**

We work very closely with the local community and they all know me. Before I started Amman Imman, I had done quite a bit of field research in the area, interviewing over 700 households. I live with the people; we are family. They are very patient with me but they need help desperately. They are watching their children die. Fifty percent of the children die before the age of 5 and twenty-five



percent of the children die from thirst or from drinking dirty water. Since we are one of the few NGOs to attempt to provide relief to the Azawak by providing potable and sustainable water, we are well-respected by other organizations. They admire us and come to us for advice on how to handle water issues.

**How can ASP and its alumni community support Amman Imman?**

I remember as a student at ASP, I attended two school assemblies which made a particularly important impact on me and helped shape my commitment to help others less fortunate than myself. One was about Amnesty International and its human rights work and the other

was a presentation made by individuals living with HIV. These experiences opened my mind to the numerous dilemmas people face across the world and the work that needs to be done to ameliorate these difficult situations. I would love to have the opportunity to talk to the ASP student body about the world water crisis, global climate change, and the immediate effect both are having on the lives of the Azawak people. It would be both an honor and a privilege if ASP students choose to help support Amman Imman through awareness-raising as well as fundraising. Schools and students in particular are our most important partners and allies and they have already helped raise a majority of our funds and support. I would be also grateful to have the support of the alumni and parent community, either through direct contributions, or by putting me in touch with corporations and/or foundations that would like to sponsor or partner with Amman Imman. It is the generosity of compassionate individuals which fuels everything we do, and helps us bring life and hope to the Azawak.

If you would like to learn more about how you can support Amman Imman, please visit: [www.ammanimman.org](http://www.ammanimman.org)