

Water Poverty Is A Crisis For Navajo Communities

By [Laurel Morales](#)

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Lindsay Johnson has had to conserve water most of her life. It's a happy day when the water lady fills her barrels.

During the season of giving we hear a lot about the small gifts that can help people in third world countries. Buy a goat, feed family in Nepal. Donate money for tree seedlings, help farmers in India.

But a new effort focuses this kind of development help closer to home, in this country, where many Navajo communities still lack running water.

Georgianna Johnson and her grandmother have been waiting for the water truck. They live in the small Navajo community of Smith Lake, N.M., and their water barrels were getting low.

“You know what we do?” Johnson laughs. “The water truck’s coming! Get the buckets ready! We get all happy. Today’s the day I’m going to take a bath.” She helps her grandmother pull her freshly washed silver hair back in a bun and put on her beaded jewelry. Despite her many wrinkles, Lindsay Johnson beams like a young girl because the water lady has just filled her barrels.

“We cook with it,” Lindsay Johnson said. “And we wash our face with it. We took a bath with it and everything.”

“Water’s has got to do with everything,” Georgianna Johnson said. “To wash the dishes my aunt tells us the rinsing water is still clean. She says use that the next time when you gonna wash dishes. That’s how we like make the water stretch.”

Everyone in this remote high desert village in northwestern New Mexico has to make the water stretch. They are among the 40 percent of Navajo who have no running water.

Darlene Arviso and the [Saint Bonaventure Indian Mission](#) provide relief. Arviso delivers water in a hulking yellow truck. She drives across rugged dirt roads to 250 homes once a month filling plastic barrels, buckets, jars and whatever containers the families have.

“Everybody knows me around here they’ll be waving at me,” Arviso said. “They call me the water lady.”

The water comes from the mission well, 50 miles away. For more than three decades the mission has provided water, housing, a school and other services for this portion of the Navajo Nation. Mission director Chris Halter, a tall, bald, blue-eyed man with a quick smile, has worked here the past eight years. “It’s a third world country in the middle of the wealthiest country in the world,” Halter said. Halter should know. He’s done mission work in some of the poorest parts of Africa and Latin America.



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This is a typical home on the Navajo Nation. Houses are spread out for the once common sheep herding way of life. Today their remoteness puts them far from economic opportunities.

So the mission reached out for help and they found George McGraw, a Los Angeles-based human rights lawyer and the founder of a non-profit called [DIGDEEP](#). It provides water systems to developing countries with local partners. McGraw received a phone call from the friend of a mission board member who said she wanted to make a contribution and sponsor a well.

“She said, ‘I just have one stipulation,’” McGraw recalled. “I said ‘oh what’s that?’ She said, ‘it has to be used here in the U.S.’ I said, ‘Karen you’re crazy. I’m a human rights lawyer, there’s no need here in the United States.’”

She told him there was a need on the Navajo Nation. And the need is tremendous. McGraw looked into it. While the average person in the United States uses more than a hundred gallons a day, in Smith Lake they use seven — seven gallons to drink, to cook and to clean.

“It really is an incredible injustice,” McGraw said. “If you’re born Navajo, you’re 67 times more likely not to have a tap or toilet in your house than if you’re born black, white, Asian or Hispanic American.”

So McGraw’s organization, along with the Indian mission, are now raising funds to dig a 2,000-foot well closer to these families’ homes. It will cost about \$300,000 to dig the well. So far DIGDEEP has raised \$50,000.

While the organizations raise funds, Lindsay Johnson said she’ll continue to conserve her water the way she always has. “We just use it bit by bit,” Johnson said. “That’s the only way we can save some of it until it’s all gone.

This is the first of several wells DIGDEEP hopes to develop on the Navajo Nation.