

Quenching thirsts

Ex-Kentuckian wants to dig wells for Africans

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By **Katya Cengel**

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He's a little nervous, but Bardstown native and part-time resident Michael Kirtley isn't surprised about his 28-year-old daughter's attempts to bring water to a region in Africa so desolate that even aid workers shy away.

"I'm used to her having ideas that are kind of off the beaten path," he said of his daughter, Ariane Kirtley. "She's a big time adventurer."

Credit for that, he acknowledges, probably goes to an upbringing that included traveling with him and her mother, his former wife, Aubine, around West Africa on assignment for National Geographic.



Ariane Kirtley was 6 months old when she crossed the Sahara Desert. At age 3, she spent hours cuddling with a 3-year-old gorilla named Julia whom her photojournalist parents were documenting for the magazine.

It was her friendship with Julia that led her to Uganda in 1999, where she spent a semester studying gorillas while a Yale University medical anthropology student. One of her goals then was to help conserve wildlife. But, after observing both gorillas and people, she said, she shifted gears.

"I realized, until you work with the people suffering greatly, you can't possibly think about conservation."

Ariane Kirtley, who grew up in Kentucky and Africa, spoke by phone from Washington, D.C. -- one of many locations she now calls home. She said she went on to obtain a graduate degree in public health and spent the summer of 2003 in Niger collecting data on hygiene and sanitation practices, returning after graduation to continue research.

It was then that she visited the poorest region in the poorest nation in the world -- Azawak, Niger.

As a child and young adult, she said, she had witnessed poverty in Niger, Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, the Ivory Coast and Algeria, but she had "never seen a situation this bad."

A vast plain on the edge of the Sahara Desert, about twice the size of Kentucky, Azawak is home to more than 500,000 people, most of them pastoral nomads, who for nine months of the year survive on less than a glass of water a day, Ariane Kirtley said.

As a consequence of severely inadequate annual rainfall, coupled with a harsh environment and lack of infrastructure and human resources, the inhabitants often are forced walk thirty or more miles a day for water.

In an effort to improve that situation, Ariane Kirtley established a group called Amman Imman, which means "water is life" in a local language, and is attempting to raise \$250,000 to construct two wells that would serve about 50,000 people and their livestock.

Amman Imman functions under her father's nonprofit Friendship Caravan, an American organization founded in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, that is devoted to improving relations between Americans and people in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Amman Imman was a perfect fit, said Michael Kirtley, although he acknowledged that the idea of his daughter going to an area that other aid workers avoid, fearing for their well being, is a concern.

But she is committed, he said -- something he credits in part to her childhood in Kentucky.

"There is something about coming from Kentucky that removes you from the materialistic world," he said. "I think Kentucky is closer to the welcoming of humanity you have in Africa than in other places of the country."

Today Ariane Kirtley heads to Europe to raise money for Amman Imman.

She now has \$130,000 -- enough for one well. By the time she heads to Africa later this year, she hopes to have the rest, and then expects to move on to other efforts in the area.

It's a commitment her father admires.

"I see her as a hero, really."

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Two children fetch water from a pond in Niger contaminated with animal and human waste. During the nine-month dry season, the children travel more than 30 miles round-trip a day in search of water. (By Ariane Kirtley, Special to The Courier-Journal)

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ON THE WEB

To learn more about Amman Imman, or make a donation, go to www.waterforniger.org.

Ariane Kirtley will chronicle her fundraising efforts and well construction for The Courier-Journal in coming weeks. Go to www.courier-journal.com in the next week or so to read her blog.



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An 18-year-old mother gave her 10-month-old son a drink of dirty water in the Camp of Tchintaloukan. Ten children died in the community of 120 individuals last year from diarrheal illness caused by consuming the water, which is contaminated with human and animal waste. (Photos by Ariane Kirtley, Special to The C-J)



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Children learn to read the Quran and write in Arabic when they are not too busy fetching water or with other chores.