



“Water Lady” Darlene Arviso starts to unhook the water hose on the water truck in order to start filling up an underground tanker. (Times photo — Shondiin Silversmith)

Local, international non-profits partner to bring clean water to Smith Lake

BY SHONDIIN SILVERSMITH
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THOREAU, N.M. — It is commonly said, “Water is life,” yet many Navajos still live without running water on the Nation.

It’s not uncommon that Navajo families travel several miles to their local watering hole to haul barrels, jugs and tanks of clean water for their needs at home.

Which is why many of the locals in Thoreau, N.M. and surrounding communities see St. Bonaventure’s “Water Lady” Darlene Arviso as a saint herself.

Arviso delivers water five days a week to about eight communities surrounding Thoreau, including Smith Lake, Mariano Lake, Baca, Prewitt, Haystack, Casamero Lake, Borrego Pass and Little Water. She’s a staff member at St. Bonaventure Indian

Mission and School.

“I know everybody around and they know me,” Arviso said, which proved true as she sat behind the wheel of her bright orange water truck waving to passing cars.

Arviso has been employed with St. Bonaventure for eight years. Her day starts out with her morning bus run for the elementary school, but soon after she starts her shift as the water lady.

Armed with her cellphone and

massive truck, Arviso heads out into the community to deliver water to families in need.

“I go to different areas every day. I do 10 to 14 houses a day,” Arviso said of her route, adding that if some of the elders are home alone she’ll help them fill their buckets and take them inside.

Of the 3,500 gallons of water Arviso lugs around the community she said she gives out about 3,000 most days. She

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Water: ‘I like what I’m doing because I’m helping my people.’

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visits the families at least once a month to fill their water jugs.

“This is the only (free) water point the community has,” Arviso said, adding that bringing the families water is only part of what she does.

She’ll often spend time with the people and visit or tell jokes. In some cases if the family is facing hardship she’ll lead a prayer for them.

“I enjoy my job. I like my people,” Arviso added, saying that the reaction she gets from the community is great.

Arviso said community members are “happy when they see the water truck,” and most of the time “they’ll be running around to clean their barrels, or for their five-gallon buckets.”

She said she even has a client who comes in with at least 50 one-gallon jugs and dozens of empty liter soda containers.

Bobby Delgarito from Baca is one that Arviso has helped. She met him in the parking lot of the St. Bonaventure Elementary School. The bed of his truck was loaded with three 55-gallon barrels and several smaller jugs, comprising a little over 200 gallons.

“I don’t have no running water at all,” Delgarito said. He’s lived without running water all his life and has always had to haul water.

“I’ve got to have it. There is no other place you can get water,” he said on the importance of his fill-ups.

But for many community members getting a visit from the local water lady, once a month isn’t enough.

As a way to bridge that gap of water needs St. Bonaventure Indian Mission has partnered with DIG DEEP, a human rights organization based out of Los Angeles, Calif. that focuses on water implementations.

The Partnership

Since DIG DEEP is a human rights organization, Executive Director George McGraw said

they are a little different from your traditional water charity.

“What we try to do, as an organization, is to convince everyone everywhere that whether they have access to water right now or not, they have a human right to water, which means fundamentally everyone is equal,” he said.

DIG DEEP is the only global water organization working in the U.S., McGraw said.

McGraw said they always work with local non-profits, because they like finding “local organizations that are doing good sustainable work.”

The non-profit DIG DEEP came across was St. Bonaventure, and McGraw said after hearing about their incredible work they understood that St. Bonaventure was really at “their wits’ end” because they didn’t have the resources to expand their current water program.

St. Bonaventure Executive Director Chris Halter said the mission has been serving water to Thoreau and surrounding communities for at least 30 years. When he first got here, he said, he didn’t realize how big the water issues are.

“It was always my desire to see what we could do to improve the water distribution,” he said, adding that he was approached by McGraw almost three years ago about the possibility of developing a water project in remote Smith Lake, N.M. that includes building a well.

Partnering with DIG DEEP “would allow us to have quicker access to more water for more people,” Halter added.

Right now St. Bonaventure’s water program consists of Arviso and the 3,500-gallon water truck, water spigots on mission grounds and a shower at their thrift store.

Most people run out of water by the middle of the month, which will result in them seeking outside sources or even having to pay for water.

The Project

The water issues on the Navajo Nation are what led

McGraw and Halter to team up for the Smith Lake water project.

“We’re the only ones, to my knowledge, working on the Navajo Nation, where about 40 percent of people across the nation don’t have a tap or a toilet at home,” McGraw said.

“We’ve been working with families out there for a couple of years now to plan a water access project that will bring clean water to about 250 homes,” McGraw added.

The homes the water project will serve are the homes too far out of service range for NTUA lines.

McGraw said they got a piece of land and intend on drilling a well into the middle of the Smith Lake community.

“It’ll help a lot of people.

If they build that well there it’ll be closer to some of the communities so they don’t have to come all the way out here to get water,” Arviso said, noting some people travel over 50 miles to get water from St. Bonaventure.

One of the families Arviso often delivers water to in Smith Lake is Brenda George and her 76-year-old mother Lindsey Johnson.

George said they’ve been relying on water from St. Bonaventure for at least 25 years.

“It’s hard to find water around here,” she said because some of the wells in the area are contaminated with uranium. “St. Bonaventure helps a lot of people.”

George said that a well in the area would help families because “some of them don’t want to drink out of the sink nowadays” and the well will provide them with drinking water, which will decrease families’ need to buy water.

George said they have a waterline but the line has been broken, which limits their water use and increases their bill.

“We hardly use water.”

George said. Much of their water use is for bathing and washing dishes. According to George, she and her mother will often use only a quart of water

apiece for bathing.

When it comes to drinking and cooking water, George said they have to make sure it’s clean because the water that comes from the line “doesn’t taste right.”

She said when she gets water straight from the tap there is often a layer of “grease” on top of the water.

“I don’t know what kind of things are on top of there,” she said, adding that her animals won’t even drink the water.

People may wonder why families like George’s don’t just leave the area and relocate to somewhere that has drinkable water.

George said her mother doesn’t want to leave her home, and many of the elders in the area are the same way.

“She doesn’t want to go elsewhere. She doesn’t want to leave from here. She just wants to stay here,” she said, which is why they make due with what they have.

George’s family is only one of the many families in Smith Lake that the DIG DEEP and St. Bonaventure water project will benefit. The well will be between 1,200 and 1,800 feet deep, McGraw said and they intend on building a new clean, safe well with a fill station and a couple of 4,000-gallon storage tanks.

They even bought an additional water truck.

“With two water trucks, (they’ll be) able to deliver two or three times more water per household per month,” McGraw added, and “instead of delivering it into buckets or barrels on people’s front porches we’re going to work with every family on the route to build a gravity-feed storage tank.”

The storage tank will be an elevated plastic tank that will have a small solar array on it, to keep the water from freezing in the winter, and that will use gravity to bring water into basic indoor plumbing.

Why Navajo?

Before DIG DEEP started working on the Navajo Nation,

McGraw said they worked for almost four years in East and West Africa.

It wasn’t until the organization received a call from a donor in 2012 telling them that they wanted their donation to be used in the U.S. that they started exploring the water situation in their own country.

“Like so many Americans without Native ties, I didn’t know where to spend that money. I didn’t know of any big populations in the U.S. that didn’t have access to water,” McGraw said. It was the donor who pointed DIG DEEP toward the Navajo Nation.

McGraw said when they started researching organizations working on the Navajo Nation that DIG DEEP could support, they weren’t able to find one.

“There is no one from the American service society, non-profit or for-profit that is out there helping these families,” he said, adding that “it’s such a complicated problem, but also at the same time a simple one to solve.”

When McGraw learned that no organization was helping the Navajo Nation he said, “We were just so flabbergasted.”

McGraw soon learned that 13 percent of Navajos across the country, including 40 percent of Navajos living on the Navajo Nation, “are suffering from this same problem that we’re solving to the tune of tens of billions of dollars a year in every other country but our own.”

“That call kind of woke us up and we decided we’re going to refocus our resources here,” he added, which led to them to start planning their project in Smith Lake by mid 2013.

Where They Stand

Since 2013, McGraw said they’ve been able to do a feasibility study, work with hydrologists to make sure there is clean water and receive the plot of land for the project.

McGraw added that one of the reasons why this project is so vital to the area is because “the wells that these homes use to rely on or the livestock that they

use to rely on are contaminated with arsenic uranium.”

To make sure that uranium is not an issue, Halter said they’ve also been working with NTUA, which was very helpful in providing certain studies and maps that have already been done in the Smith lake area.

It’s helped the specialists on the project determine whether or not the potential uranium contamination was going to be an issue, Halter added.

“A lot of this (uranium contamination) we won’t know until we actually drill the hole and see what’s down there,” Halter said, but he feels that they’ve done a lot of due diligence to make sure “we were going to be doing something in the right area for all the right reasons.”

Everything has been done while both organizations have been fundraising to support the project.

McGraw said they’ve been fundraising for over a year and “we’ve raised over \$150,000.”

That’s almost enough money to start construction on the well, he added, hoping that if fundraising continues they can start construction this summer. “This is a huge, expensive project and it’s taken a lot longer to raise that money for this project,” Halter said.

According to McGraw the well itself will cost around \$200,000, but the full project with home improvements will cost over \$400,000.

Donations can be made through the St. Bonaventure website at www.stbonaventuremission.org or the DIG DEEP website at www.digdeep.org. When making a donation make sure to indicate it is for the Smith Lake water project.

McGraw said DIG DEEP is also hosting the “Give Water, Give Warmth” campaign which allows people to purchase a Pendleton blanket with two-thirds of the proceeds going to the water project.

“This is just the first of many projects that we hope to accomplish on the Navajo Nation,” McGraw added.