

LaToya Ruby Frazier | We the Future

A creative solution for the water crisis in Flint, Michigan

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16 languages
- Reading List**
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00:05 So, in 2016, I was commissioned to produce a photo essay about the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. And that's been going on since 2014. And I accepted the commission with the idea that I would photograph three generations of women dealing with the crisis on a daily basis.

00:30 I was fortunate to meet two best friends, artists, activists and poets Amber Hasan and Shea Cobb, who took me around Flint. As a school bus driver, Shea Cobb became the central figure of the photo essay, along with her mother, Ms. Renée, and her eight-year-old daughter, Zion. I obsessively followed Shea's school bus routes. And when Shea wasn't driving the bus, she would be watching over Zion, making sure she was studying. I embedded myself in every intimate facet of Shea's life. When Shea took me to Zion's school, and I saw the water fountains covered with signs that said, "Contaminated. Do not drink," I couldn't pick up my camera to photograph it. It rocked me to the core to see that in America, we can go from fountains that say "Whites" or "Blacks only," to today seeing fountains that say, "Contaminated water. Do not drink." And somehow, that's acceptable?

01:39 The residents in Flint have been forced to drink with, cook with and bathe with bottled water, while paying the highest water bills in the country for water that is infected with deadly legionella bacteria.

01:55 It was natural for me to go to Flint, because industrial pollution, bacteria-contaminated water were all too familiar for me growing up in my hometown, Braddock, Pennsylvania, where my mother and I battled cancer and autoimmune disorders like lupus. Our 14-year collaboration, "The Notion of Family," was created out of our struggle to survive environmental racism, healthcare inequity and chemical emissions that were being deregulated and released from the United States Steel Corporation, making Braddock the town with the highest asthma and infant mortality rates in the country. From the Monongahela River to the Flint River, in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, "The town, the whole valley, has turned its back upon the river. It has used it as a sewer, as a drain, as a place for throwing their waste."

03:03 General Motors has been cited for dumping chemicals in the Flint River for decades. When my photo essay "Flint is Family" came out in August of 2016, it was released to remind America that although Flint was no longer headline news, the water crisis was far from over. And, of course, I knew it was going to take more than a series of photographs on my part to bring relief to the people in Vehicle City. Shea and I bonded over our mothers and grandmothers. Amber and I bonded over our battles with lupus. Together, we decided to remain in each other's life and continue our creative efforts.

03:49 In 2017, Shea and Amber cofounded artist collective The Sister Tour, whose mission is to provide a safe space for Flint artists. One year later, I mounted my solo exhibition, "Flint is Family," here in New York City at Gavin Brown's Enterprise on West 127th Street. As the audience approaches the facade of the building, they see a 30-foot billboard. The 30-foot billboard is made of three large color negatives with the message "Water Is Life," spelled out in Nestle water bottles by The Sister Tour. Nestle, the largest water-bottling company in the world, pumps 400 gallons of water per minute out of aquifers in Lake Michigan, nearly free of charge. The company also extracts millions of liters of water from First Nation reservations, while they have no access to

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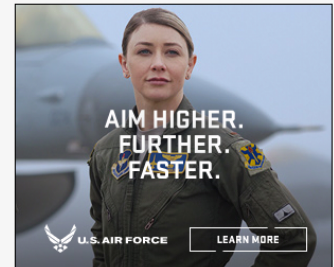
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clean water at all.

04:51

This is a fundraiser print that I used to raise money to send The Sister Tour to different venues to educate people on the ongoing crisis. I also continued to keep it in the public eye by producing countdown flags that were raised on institutions across the country. This past June, Amber emailed me with the news that Michigan's attorney general dropped all criminal charges in the Flint Water Crisis investigation, where eight state and city employees were facing charges as serious as manslaughter.

05:28

I could no longer idly stand by and wait for the government to do its job. Justice has been delayed, and justice has been denied. It's been five years, and we're still waiting on justice for the men, women and children in Flint. I asked Amber, "What can I do?" She told me about a man named Moses West that she met in Puerto Rico, who invented a 26,000-pound atmospheric water generator. Amber took Moses to elected officials in the city of Flint. None of them seemed interested in bringing the machine for relief to Flint at all. Amber needed to get the machine from a military base in Texas all the way to Flint. Nobody in Flint had that kind of money lying around. And it was at that point that I decided to take the proceeds from my solo exhibition "Flint is Family," along with the generous match grant from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, and sent it to Moses West.

06:44

This past July, Moses West and his atmospheric water generator arrived to Flint, Michigan, on North Saginaw between Marengo and Pulaski, and is actually still there right now, operating. This community that sits three miles from downtown has been stripped of its schools, access to healthy grocery stores and clean water. Socially, it's viewed as a violent, poor community. But I see something completely different.

07:19

Moses, an officer, Ranger, veteran, was very clear about his water rescue mission: Bring relief of free, clean water to the people in Flint. Teach them how to use the machine, teach them how to take care of it, and most importantly, take ownership of the machine. Tell everybody across the city to bring all their containers and come and take as much water as they can stock up on, especially before the winter season hits; the machine doesn't extract moisture in freezing temperatures. This technology pulls air through a high-volume air filter. It mechanically creates condensation, which produces 2,000 gallons of water per day. Residents are free to walk up to the machine anywhere between 9am and 8pm daily and take as much as they want, alleviating them from standing in long lines for bottled water.

08:26

I've been at the machine, interviewing people, asking them, "What does it mean to see Moses and his machine in [your] community?" And, "What has it been like living without access to clean water?" Alita told me, "It's a miracle that God gave Moses the knowledge and technology to provide us with pure drinking water." She also told me that prior to the machine coming, she had severe headaches, and the water made her so sick to her stomach, she couldn't eat. Tina told me that the lead-contaminated water made her hair fall out. Usually, she's weak and very light-headed. Since using the machine, she's had energy and strength. David, he was overwhelmed with joy that someone from Texas cared. When he tasted the water, he thought to himself, "Now, this is the way God intended water to be." He brings three seven-gallon containers to refill to use at his barbecue stand.

09:37

Through creativity and solidarity, Amber Hasan, Shea Cobb, Tuklor Senegal, The Sister Tour, myself, the people of Flint, Dexter Moon, Moses West and his atmospheric water generator have been able to provide 120,000 gallons of free, clean water.

10:03

(Applause)

10:09

The people in Flint deserve access to clean water. Water is life. It is the spirit that binds us from sickness, death and destruction. Imagine how many millions of lives we could save if Moses's machine were in places like Newark, New Jersey, South Africa and India, with compassion instead of profit motives.

10:38

I loaded my camera, I locked my focus, and I placed my finger over the shutter release, as Shea and Zion went to take their first sip of clean water. When the shutter released, I was overcome with a deep sense of joy and righteousness. When I sent Shea some of the photographs, she wrote, "Thank you again for the light that you bring to my city." I immediately replied, "The light was already there within you."

11:13

It's been four years since I've been photographing in Flint, and finally, I've been able to render a poetic justice. No matter how dark a situation may be, a camera can extract the light and turn a negative into a positive.

11:34

Thank you.

11:36

(Applause)



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