Would you drink this water?

Some people in America are

They have no choice.

THIRST FOR JUSTICE

a film by Leana Hosea
Awards: Nominated for Best Documentary in Bentonville Film Festival run by Hollywood actress Geena Davis, nominated for Best Documentary and Best UK Feature at Raindance Film Festival and winner of Best Documentary at Gallup Film Festival winner and Accolade Global Film Competition.

Short synopsis: You might think America is a democracy, where freedom of speech and basic rights are guaranteed. But at its heart, there is a great injustice. Against all the odds several extraordinary citizens are banding together and fighting back for their basic right to clean water. Armed only with facts and their illnesses, they risk arrest to take on the might of industry and government. From Flint to the Navajo Nation, via Standing Rock, this is their story.

Length: 70 minute documentary film. Flexible length for TV.
3 minute Sizzle reel: https://vimeo.com/277335153
Film Screener: https://vimeo.com/360879338/56039e4d7d (Password: Thirst2)
Director’s statement: I’ve been a BBC journalist in international news for the past twelve years and I’ve covered a lot of incredible stories. I was breaking news in Cairo, reporting on The Arab Spring from day one in Tahrir Square, the war in Gaza and the crisis in Yemen. I went to America in September 2016 on a prestigious Knight-Wallace Fellowship for journalists at the University of Michigan to research water contamination in Flint and on the Navajo Nation. I found a story so compelling and characters so engaging that I knew I had to give a voice to people who are being sidelined. Making this film independently has been a rollercoaster journey. I found myself amidst piles of radioactive uranium mine waste in Arizona, where I maxed out the geiger counter with the highest radiation readings possible. I held the Sheriff in North Dakota to account for human rights violations at Standing Rock and I was arrested and spent time in county jail for filming a peaceful pipeline protest. I was allowed to film indigenous spiritual ceremonies for the first time, because of the time I spent building trust within these communities and living the story with them. I was awarded the inaugural Media Fellowship at the University of Michigan’s School of Environment and Sustainability to make this film. I’m now back at the BBC as an investigative TV journalist, where I continue to cover pollution, corporate malfeasance and other rights issues.

Summary: In the spring of 2015, residents from two communities enlist the help of scientists to prove their suspicions; that their water was dangerously contaminated. In Sander, Arizona, mother of two Janene Yazzie, finds out from tests carried out by a PhD student, that the drinking water in her son’s school—once her own school—has more than double the acceptable levels of uranium. Further, she learns that the State has for years kept relevant results hidden from the public and stopped further testing. Janene suspects that drinking from contaminated school water fountains may have contributed to her contracting ovarian cancer. The science seems to support this.
Biologist Dr Cheryl Dyer’s peer reviewed research showed that uranium contaminated water can cause reproductive cancers. Janene embarks on a mission to investigate the source of the contamination. She investigates the site of the largest radioactive spill by volume in US history, which remains virtually unknown and unreported. This part of the film draws on the expertise of nuclear engineer Kim Kearfott, who notes that some areas of the Navajo reservation have uranium contamination levels at much higher levels than the evacuation zone of Chernobyl. We get the highest readings possible on the geiger counter, which has never been shown. Despite this an industry head tells us you can eat enriched uranium, because it’s not dangerous or radioactive.

On the other side of the country in Flint, Michigan, residents bypassed the state too and organised for their water to be tested by the scientist Marc Edwards. The results proved what the state had been denying, that the water was contaminated with lead and other toxins. Christina and her husband Adam Murphy and their children are now suffering health problems. The fact that the state suspended democracy and put them under the rule of an unelected emergency manager, who switched their water supply to the corrosive Flint River water to save money, shatters their beliefs. It leads this conservative couple to start their own investigations and become activists. African American organiser, Nayyirah Shariff, was running a campaign against water shutoffs in Flint, when the water crisis hit. She is a pivotal leader in pushing for all the city’s lead pipes replaced and holding those guilty to account. The unprecedented movement for the protection of clean drinking water in Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline brings these women together. It’s a critical moment for them and marks the beginning of a growing movement that’s becoming more globally interconnected, to protect water.

The viewer is taken on this journey of discovery with the filmmaker, Leana Hosea, an experienced BBC journalist. The film starts in 2010 when Leana was on an assignment to cover the proposed resurgence of uranium mining in the Grand Canyon area. Down a uranium mine she talks to miners, who are unconcerned that they are not wearing masks. But on the nearby Navajo
reservation she meets many people who say they are getting sick and dying from the legacy of uranium mining, which has contaminated their water. Not having the definitive evidence to prove the connection between the contamination and illness, she is devastated she cannot report the full story. So years later on a break from the BBC, she returns and sets out to prove what is happening to this first nation community. What she discovers is widespread water contamination and an even bigger coverup. There are 15,000 abandoned uranium mines across the Western United States and the tap water of tens of millions have been found to contain carcinogens. There are numerous cities with lead in their drinking water.

Through the stories of the Navajo, Flint and Standing Rock, this film links widespread water contamination to the erosion of democracy in the United States. It shows that several toxins are known to at least the offending corporations and government officials, but that all too often they do not share their findings. 'Thirst For Justice' viscerally demonstrates the increasing restrictions to freedom in America. In Standing Rock people are met with teargas, rubber bullets and water canon. The filmmaker was also arrested, detained and faced $85,000 in restitution by the biggest pipeline company in North America. There are many villains - the corporate giants, government officials and the forces of racism, greed and inequality. But the hope is in ordinary citizens, who are the film’s heroes and heroines, fighting to take back their power to protect our most precious resource – water.

**Topic and style:** Access to clean water is the issue of our time and it's not just a problem in developing countries. 'Thirst For Justice' reveals how contaminated water is impacting one of the richest country’s in the world, affecting millions across America. The UN says that by 2030 demand for clean water will outstrip supply by 40%  'Thirst For Justice' is the first film that connects the experiences of Indigenous Americans, African American and Caucasian Americans through the struggle for justice that women on reservations and the inner city are fighting for. ‘Thirst For Justice’ is about stepping out these silos of race, class, urban and rural divides, bringing these stories together through the common thread of water. These are not anomalies, but the canaries in the coalmine. The film is also unique in being characters driven, as opposed to being topic and expert led. So the audience not only learns important facts, but gets to feel what it’s like to live without clean water.

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