

Water, and hope, run dry for East Porterville woman caught in drought

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The numbers alone are exhausting. Juana Garcia has five children, two chronic diseases, one waterless home and zero income.

She is 49 and living in East Porterville, where she hides indoors from the summer heat by day and lies awake next to her youngest children by night.

Garcia's stress is like a ticking time bomb, caught in the same drought crisis that [threatens the health](#) of thousands in her town.

"Sometimes I think I'm just about to fall asleep," she said in Spanish, "but then I start thinking, what am I going to do about water? Will I last much longer here? Yes, mentally I get very stressed out."

Garcia's well went dry in 2013, sputtering a mixture of water and sand every now and then for years until it finally gave up. But she still had running water until March. A next-door neighbor allowed her family to hook their system up to his well before cutting them off for fear of running out himself.

Tulare County has installed 68 water tanks in East Porterville, where some 700 families have no running water.

Now Garcia relies on another friendly neighbor, Donna Johnson, to continually refill the 25-gallon tubs she can't carry to a public water source. The two cars in her driveway sit in disrepair.

Johnson is known as the water angel. She's the first person who noticed the growing number of well failures after her own went dry in 2014. She quickly organized an emergency response, using small donations and her own money to deliver water bottles, soap, disposable plates and utensils. The 72-year-old is her town's biggest advocate, sitting in on drought funding meetings with county and state leaders, shepherding reporters from around the globe so no one forgets East Porterville.

Johnson still makes her rounds, worried that if she stops, people like Garcia will get sicker — or worse. She parks her black Ford truck in front of Garcia's home once a week, greets the puppies on her way in and hollers, "Hi Juana, I brought you some water!"

Johnson towers over Garcia, her 4-foot-5-inch frame, flip flops and chipped green nail polish giving her an air of permanent youthfulness. "A teeny little thing," Johnson says lovingly.

She and Garcia don't speak the same language, but Johnson knows what's necessary: That Garcia is a single mother whose own two feet are her only mode of transport. How else would she get water?

Garcia was diagnosed with osteoarthritis and lupus five years ago. Lupus is an incurable disease that causes her immune system to attack itself.

She had just given birth to her youngest child, Christopher Castro, and holding the baby felt more like cradling a large boulder. Standing made her feet ache. She became allergic to the sun, easily fatigued if she stayed out for too long. She couldn't work.

Earlier this month, Garcia's doctor gave her some good news. Tests showed she was symptom-free. The revelation gave her a small boost of confidence. She can finally start looking for a job.

But lupus symptoms come and go.

Past to present

There's a palpable irony in the way Garcia's life turned out. She was born in a small village in Michoacán, Mexico. Her parents grew corn and raised cattle for sale. She and her eight siblings sold tortas and tacos at festivals. Her mom sold clothes she bought wholesale in the city. They were poor, but had enough for luxuries like milk and fish.

Garcia's father built their house brick by brick. There was no electricity and no running water for many years. A neighbor 10 homes away let them pull up water from her well in buckets.

Now Garcia washes dishes the same way she did then. It's a two-part, 2-gallon system: After lathering each dish with soap, she rinses it off in one bucket, then dips it for a final rinse in a second bucket.

"I don't feel right not having running water," she said. "If it was just me, I come from Mexico, so I'm already used to it. But not my children."

Garcia finished high school, then spent a year in a college in Mexico before dropping out. She was 22 when the family relocated to California. They worked in the fields for 10 years until her mother, Maria Garcia, fell from a tree in 1998 and injured her back.

With a \$10,000 workers compensation settlement, Maria Garcia bought a *lonchera*, a taco truck. The family business thrived. Soon, they'd saved enough money to move from their small apartment in Porterville to a property east of town with two baby blue houses worth around \$150,000. Maria thought they'd enjoy the quiet.

Juana Garcia raised her children in the two-bedroom home closest to the street; her parents grew old in the three-bedroom home tucked behind. In 2006, when her mother became too sick to keep working, she sold the *lonchera* and paid off their property. It was her biggest accomplishment.

By 2008, Garcia's mother died of complications from diabetes. She was 64. Her father moved back to Mexico shortly after.

Garcia's mother didn't have a will and left \$200,000 in hospital bills. Now, it would cost at least \$2,000 to make Garcia the official homeowner, a potentially futile effort if Medi-Cal pursues a lien against the property. Her father could have passed the home to her if Garcia's parents' marriage was recognized in this country.

Becoming the homeowner is the only way Garcia could once again have running water. [Tulare County](#) distributes 2,500-gallon tanks to homes with dry wells, but is required by the state, which controls funding, to have the property owner's signature.

That requirement will likely soon change, said Andrew Lockman, director of the county Office of Emergency Services. He said the county has run into many instances of "nontitled owners." Last week, leaders received tentative state approval to add such residents to the waiting list for a tank, so long as they can confirm the person is a lawful occupant.

"This compromise was reached to expedite emergency relief to this category of individuals/families that would otherwise have to wait for probate or other lengthy process to resolve their title issues," he said.

Even with one lengthy process evaded, Garcia would quickly run into another.

In East Porterville, 68 tanks have been installed, but some 700 families have no running water. And the county can't guarantee water to fill tanks, as deals with water suppliers sometimes change overnight.

Living without running water illuminates just how many things require it. There's the obvious — showering, washing

dishes, laundry and brushing teeth. But even keeping the swamp cooler on means feeding it 3 gallons every two hours. On a recent day nearing 100 degrees, Garcia turned off the cooler around 2 p.m. “This thing sucks too much water,” she said, bracing herself for sweat.

“I don’t think I’ll last another year here like this,” Garcia said. “How can the children and I live without water?”

Money problems

For Garcia, simply learning about her options has been difficult. Johnson tries to help, but their language barrier makes it hard to keep Garcia’s story straight.

Like many immigrants with limited English, Garcia understands more than she speaks. She’s also shy, her voice sometimes barely audible. Once, Garcia mistakenly told Johnson her mother owed Medi-Cal \$2,000, a debt 100 times smaller than she actually owed.

Garcia received \$300 a month in child support through February, an amount she considered small until it ended. [Community Services Employment Training](#) pays her energy bill.

She gets \$400 every 9th day of the month in food stamps, but this month, she ran out on the 2nd. Garcia can’t afford many fruits and vegetables. Cooking requires water to wash dishes and turning the oven on makes the house uncomfortably hot. So, Garcia and her children mostly turn to fast food, which is cheap and wastes no more of their precious potable water supply.

I don’t think I’ll last another year here like this.

Juana Garcia

One especially hot day last month, Garcia and her youngest two children ate McChicken sandwiches and fries for lunch before picking up a Little Caesar’s pizza and Pepsi to take to the community pool.

Her oldest two children moved out. Her youngest two are Christopher, 5, and Noemi Castro, 11. The middle child, Manuel Torres, just turned 19.

Torres should have graduated high school in June, but he failed the last semester of math. He’ll go back in the fall, balancing school with his now full-time job at the grocery store Vallarta.

He walks to his 3 p.m. work shift, sweating under the afternoon sun, in black slacks and a white-collared shirt. He plans to fix up one of those cars in the driveway, just as soon as he can get his license (he has failed the test six times).

Torres pays his own phone bill, plus the family’s cable and Internet. He buys essentials like toilet paper and toothpaste, sometimes snacks, and pays for family trips to visit his older brother in Bakersfield and his aunt in Salinas.

Most of Garcia’s siblings live in Porterville, but none come around much since their mother died. Asking her own family for help makes Garcia uncomfortable. They’ve seen how she’s living, she said. If they wanted to help, they would.

Garcia’s 22-year-old daughter Janee Garcia lives in Porterville with her boyfriend and works long hours at a bank. Sometimes she picks her mother and siblings up to shower at her house. Janee helps her mother pay property taxes every year.

Torres feels the weight of his responsibility to the family. He often thinks about what it would take to move them into a small apartment. He doesn’t have credit. Most of his money currently goes to fast food.

“Sometimes it just feels like a lot of stuff is out of my grasp,” he said.

Hope for tomorrow

What was once a lawn on Garcia’s property is now dust. A fruit tree just inside the gate is skeletal. Trash litters the backyard — old appliances, tires, shopping carts. There’s an empty chicken coop and fenced area where her parents raised goats. The garden is little more than dead sunflowers and weeds.

The house where Garcia’s parents once lived sits empty. Her own home looks more gray than blue, its exterior paint chipped and wind-carried dirt smudging what’s left. A wide, crumbling leather sectional sofa takes up most of the concrete living room floor.

Above the sofa, hanging crooked on a nail, is a sign that reads, “HOPE: Live for today, hope for tomorrow.”

For Garcia, hope is a waiting game. Maybe with a job she’d have enough money to finally become the legal owner of her home and get one of those coveted county tanks. Or maybe she and her children could move to an apartment in Porterville, where people still water their lawns and fill their decorative fountains. If she doesn’t do something soon, she worries Johnson will tire of bringing her water and stop coming around.

But Garcia’s home is her mother’s legacy. The memories and sentiment have her stuck.

So continues the cycle of stress. Some days it makes her completely immobile, shifting between the couch and the bed in endless contemplation.

“It’s depressing,” she said. “You feel like you have the world on your shoulders, and you can’t do anything to help it.”

Another day comes to an end. Just as Garcia is about to fall asleep, a familiar thought pops into her head.

Stay or leave?

She’ll make a decision eventually. It likely won’t be tonight.

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