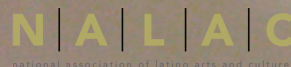
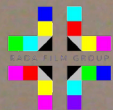


# THE AGE OF WATER

a documentary film by Alfredo Alcántara and Isabel Alcántara

<https://vimeo.com/284369461>

Password: AGEOFWATER



# LOGLINE

When the water in her small Mexican town becomes radioactive, a young mom suddenly finds herself leading a local resistance movement.

Her life is upended when she has to face a powerful and corrupt government hellbent on burying the truth.



# SYNOPSIS



La Cantera is a small rural community in Mexico that has recently lost 12 people to leukemia, including three little girls under the age of 10. Public demands for answers about these fatalities was met with a swift dismissal from the local authorities. At the center of this furor is Nely Baeza, a 28-year-old single mom, who was thrust into a leadership position she never expected. After her daughter nearly bleeds to death, Nely charges into activism and begins digging for answers from the government. Soon after, she finds herself knee-deep in Mexico's dark business of water.

Nely's work draws the attention of the Mayor's Office and, more specifically, the State Water Commission, the highest authority on the matter. At its helm is Humberto Navarro, a politician scaling the ranks of government whose career hangs in the balance as La Cantera starts making national headlines.

As her community tears itself apart, Nely steels herself against all the worst possible outcomes. Her growth from idealistic and hopeful to hardened and shrewd, is the driving force behind this movement and this film. No longer complacent, no longer passive, no longer willing to settle for less, Nely's story is the chronicle of what happens when your eyes are opened to a stark reality and everything changes forever.

# FILMMAKERS

## CO-DIRECTOR



**Isabel Alcántara** is a Mexican documentary filmmaker with a background in photojournalism from the Newhouse School of Public Communications. In 2012, she and her brother co-founded Ponderosa Productions, a documentary production company. She has produced award-winning content that has screened at SXSW and major television networks such as A&E and History Channel. She has also shot photo and multimedia content for *Paper Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and is currently a producer at BRIC TV in Brooklyn.

## CO-DIRECTOR, CINEMATOGRAPHER



**Alfredo Alcántara** is a Mexican documentary filmmaker and cinematographer. Along with his sister Isabel, he co-founded Ponderosa Productions. His camerawork is featured in the award-winning documentary *American Promise* (Sundance Film Festival, Jury Award 2013). In 2014, he co-directed *Duke and the Buffalo*, an Official Selection short documentary at Tribeca Film Festival. That same year, he shot and directed *El Porvenir*, Official Selection short documentary at SXSW. He recently shot the History Channel digital series, *Ranchlands*. He is currently producing documentaries at CNN in New York.

## PRODUCER



**Michèle Stephenson** pulls from her Caribbean roots and international experience as a human rights attorney to tackle documentaries on communities of color and human rights. A three-time Emmy Award nominee, her work has appeared on PBS, Showtime and MTV. Her most recent film, *American Promise* has won honors at the Sundance and New York Film Festivals, the African American Film Critic's Association and was awarded the PUMA BritDoc Impact Award.

## PRODUCER



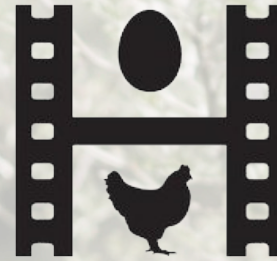
**Joe Brewster** is a Harvard and Stanford educated psychiatrist who specialized in organizational analysis. In 1996, he wrote and directed *The Keeper*, which was an official selection in the dramatic narrative competition section of the Sundance Film Festival. His most recent film, *American Promise* has won honors at the Sundance Film Festival, the African American Film Critic's Association and was awarded the PUMA BritDoc Impact Award. He is a three-time Emmy Award nominee.

## PRODUCER



**Deanna Urciuoli** is a Second Assistant Director in the Director's Guild of America. She is a graduate of Tisch School of the Arts, and the prestigious DGA Training Program. She has worked side-by-side with various established directors on such productions as *The Leftovers*, *Madame Secretary*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Gossip Girl* and *The Knick*. She currently produces video content at The New York Times as the Post-Production Supervisor of T Brand Studio.

# FUNDERS AND SUPPORT



**IWMF** 

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BAY AREA VIDEO COALITION



**WMM**  
WOMEN MAKE MOVIES

  
**MOUNTAINFILM**



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the Arts**



NELY BAEZA

At a glance, Nely is the quintessential Mexican woman: a young mother at 28, she is also a homemaker whose life revolves around her family. Upon closer inspection, Nely is a force of nature in a small package. After the near death of her infant daughter and the three fatalities of local young girls, Nely took it upon herself to demand answers and a solution from the state. Riding on the optimism and energy of her youth, she takes on an astronomical feat that culminates in a political showdown between the local government and the community. Nely's bright eyes, sparkling personality and passionate care for her neighborhood come directly under fire when the very community she's championing turns against her. *The Age of Water* is a testament to Nely's intrepid spirit and the hardening of adulthood she experiences when her entire life washes out from under her.



ELIA ZARAZÚA

A teacher at the local kindergarten, Elia watched three of her students die of leukemia over the past five years. She is frank and upfront about the disease and neglect that caused their deaths. Just like Nely, she has been shunned by her community and has become a target for intimidation tactics from anonymous sources. The climate of fear and suspicion, as well as her exhaustion, led her to resign from her position at the school. She moved away at the end of the 2017 school year.

Originally from out of town, Elia seamlessly integrated into the community, bringing higher expectations for study and schoolwork. She is a member of Nely's community coalition, and as the most educated member, holds most of the information and knowledge.



DR. MARCOS ADRIÁN ORTEGA

Dr. Marcos Adrián Ortega (Researcher at National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) is a household name in the field of geology and hydrological studies. A professor of subterranean geohydrology, and a tried and true scientist, Dr. Ortega is knee-deep - sometimes literally - in the study and preservation of the aquifer. His investigation has been thorough and precise throughout the past 20 years, yet his results have been met with nothing but denial and hostility from the local authorities.

In light of the resistance he's experienced, Dr. Ortega has switched tactics. As the water levels drop to prehistoric depths and water quality decreases, Dr. Ortega is now focused on the direct effects these dire conditions have on the health of the area's most underserved communities.

The story of La Cantera has been a clear example of his efforts. After uncovering the presence of radiation in the town's well, Dr. Ortega and the University have provided Nely and other concerned members of the community with the knowledge and information necessary to demand action from the authorities.

Reacting to the government's negligence on the issue, he has taken on the task of leading a large area-wide investigation to further study the groundwater near La Cantera. He has gathered UNAM's most prestigious research teams from around the country, and much to the discomfort of local authorities, will begin performing tests this year.

Dr. Ortega has been a constant and dedicated ally in the community's fight for clean water.



HUMBERTO NAVARRO

At a glance, Humberto Carlo Navarro is the epitome of the Mexican politician: he's authoritative, charismatic, intelligent and – with a low booming voice – unwavering in his message. Tasked with one of the nation's most important roles, he is the State Water Commissioner of a region undergoing a massive water crisis. He is also a gatekeeper in the region. As an ambassador for the Fair Trade Agreement, he is charged with providing water safety and security for multinational corporations in order to bring their businesses to Mexico. His job is, in essence, to protect the status quo.

Humberto Navarro is also a husband, a father to two daughters, an inhabitant of the region, and most importantly, a prospective mayoral candidate. For years, Navarro has scaled the rungs of politics. He's been a good soldier throughout multiple administrations, and under Enrique Peña Nieto, finally seized the opportunity to climb even higher.

Thirty minutes away from Nely, Elia and the water crisis of La Cantera, sits San Miguel de Allende – the crown jewel of the region and (according to Condé Nast Traveler) "The Best City in The World". The city is due for a new Mayor and Navarro is poised to toss his signature cowboy hat into the ring. What happens when the water commissioner, a candidate setting himself up to lead The Best City in the World, comes under public attack because the water in his region is poisoning its children?

# WHY “THE AGE OF WATER”?

*The Age of Water* exposes hard facts derived from a deluge of scientific information. Most importantly, the film explains that over millennia, droplets of rain have undertaken a slow but epic journey towards underground aquifers. These ‘layers’ of water are a record of different eras in what author Norman Maclean refers to as ‘the basement of time.’

The literal age of water is supremely important, and due to unfettered use of groundwater in some regions, all that is left is water that is tens of thousands of years old. Science speculates that this water has interacted with heavy metals, unknown minerals, and potentially natural radioactivity; after all, it has been under the Earth’s surface for over 35,000 years.

It only took a couple decades for Mexico to drain its own aquifers, and reach an ancient, ‘fossil’ layer of water. It started in the 1990’s, with the enactment of NAFTA, which created a massive land grab along Mexico’s trade corridor. Industrial farms arrived and, amidst an arid and fragile ecosystem, began growing a range of thirsty crops. Much like California’s Central Valley, the only way to grow was by extracting more groundwater.

NAFTA led to an explosion in large-scale agriculture. Ironically though, the bounty grown on Mexican soil would not remain there. It was always destined to travel hundreds of miles North to feed its neighbor. The majority of cheap produce lining American grocery stores comes from the same region where this film takes place.

It’s easy to think of this story an extreme but isolated incident. However, the crisis enveloping La Cantera is a canary in the coal mine: an example of a not-so distant future, where economic gains can easily outweigh the human right to clean water.





# VISUAL TREATMENT

Nely's world exists in an environment of extremes: the streets in her town are baked by the sun, the color of the landscape is muted, and surrounding rock walls create an enclosure around her. Highways flank her home and the hum of industry can be heard in the near distance. Yet a stone's throw away from Nely's home, tucked in a deep canyon away from the grip of civilization, is the last remaining natural spring, an expression of water's epic nature. Make no mistake, the watershed where La Cantera sits used to be a land of overflowing springs.

Bursting through the rock, in a roar that echoes through the canyon walls, is the purest of groundwater. We can see and hear its howl from an underwater shot — a song from the basement of time. *The Age of Water's* visual approach to this type of nature is meditative. Wide angular shots and intimate portrayals of our characters' interactions with the water denote moments of contemplation.

As the narrative progresses, this depiction of water in our story will fracture and suffer a visual transformation. When the news of La Cantera's radioactive water permeates our characters' lives, their perception of everything that water touches begins to change. Bathing a child or cooking a meal suddenly takes on different meanings. To Nely, it becomes a mirror not only of the truth but also of her doubts and insecurities. She observes her likeness on the water's surface and can only see fear. She fears her shortcomings and the battle that's been laid before her. In her reflection, she can see her scarcity. Poisonous water becomes a mirror to all of our protagonists' stories. The film delicately explores these moments of reflection.

Like Nely, Water Commissioner Humberto Navarro also sees himself in the water. Ensnared in the CONAGUA headquarters, a sparkling government building surrounded by enormous fountains, Navarro sees water and envisions opportunity. We dive into Navarro's world: a bonanza of industrial farms, large dams, pipelines and deep drilling. Water here takes on the form of money and it flows fast and easy.

But when water arrives in the form of rain, everything is suspended in a prolonged deep breath.

Dark clouds build over La Cantera, and as the sound of thunder rolls, a feeling of anticipation fills the town. In the film, rain brings us back to a primordial state: a respite from the sun, the dust, the ripping sound of trucks, and most importantly, reality. The water that pours down is pure and, like when we stood at the bottom of the spring, a sense of safety can be felt in Nely and our characters.

Drawing from the handheld camerawork of cinematographer James Laxton, *The Age of Water* sculpts striking scenes where intimate camera movement becomes a vehicle for characters' thoughts and raw emotions. Further, like the climactic river liberation scene in Ben Knight's *DamNation*, this film will channel water's grand and poetic nature through epic nature photography. Ultimately, a major visual inspiration for this film is Robert Elswit's *There Will Be Blood*. An exemplary film in its sweeping depiction of a crumbling environment overtaken and overexploited, its depiction of the ruthless quest for wealth is an inspiration in the way this film treats the land-grab that culminated in this water crisis.

# Outreach and Community Engagement



## **The primary impact goals for our project are twofold:**

1. to raise awareness and 2. provide grassroots efforts already working in the affected areas with enough educational information to enact changes that directly impact those immediately affected by polluted water. The ultimate measure of success is to galvanize the next generation that stands to inherit this problem.

In the US and globally, policymakers can witness the consequences of an unsustainable water supply and be encouraged to take action. A major goal for this film is galvanizing these legislators on the local level and convincing federal governments that large-scale water crises (like Flint in Michigan; Sanaa in Yemen; Cape Town in South Africa; Spain in the EU; and now most of central Mexico) are the signs that the time to fight for our water has come.

The permeability of the subject matter (pun intended) makes simple work of the audience and audience engagement goals for this film. Community screenings and discussions in the surrounding region will serve as a platform for awareness and shifting perceptions as well as an organizing tool for communities affected by lack of access to safe water. The screenings will be running in parallel to a carefully crafted impact campaign that is centered around the invigoration of small communities like La Cantera and returning the focus to local grassroots organizations that already have working models of short term solutions. The regional goals of this film are directly reflected in the unstoppable combination of an audience's awareness and their access to swift local action.

*The Age of Water's* outreach strategy is designed around a collaboration with CEDESA, a grassroots organization that has dedicated decades of work to the empowerment of communities. By providing them with a concrete story and materials to point to, they can begin reaching farther and wider with their overall message of community-led conservation.

*The Age of Water* provides an opportunity for audiences to engage in conversation about their access to water, see through the film how pressure can be brought to bare by communities and understand how homes can access alternate ways to obtain potable water. By putting an individual's story front and center of this crisis, audiences will be able to relate and understand the depth of the crisis we face on this continent and beyond.

# Collaboration



This film will be a launching pad to raise awareness among general audiences, students and policymakers worldwide and will serve as an organizing tool for communities affected by lack of access to water.

For students, it is an opportunity to grasp the human element of this crisis. It would serve as a way to create awareness among younger generations interested in environmental science, human rights, and stories about women advocating for change. Screenings in Mexico will highlight the shortcomings of local government while providing a rallying cry for communities suffering from the same neglect. In the US, and globally, policymakers can witness the consequences of an unsustainable water supply and be encouraged to take action. Its highest measure of success is energizing these legislators on the local level, convincing federal governments that large-scale water crises like Flint, Michigan, are the signs of a much more serious tipping point.

## CURRENT PARTNERS

- Rada Film Group
- Chicken & Egg Pictures
- Good Pitch Miami 2017
- Women Make Movies
- Tondowski Films (Co-Producer)
- Documentary Campus
- Isla Urbana – Rain Water Harvesting Systems
- We Tap – Water Safety App
- Food and Water Watch
- National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) – Dept. of Geo-Science & Hydrology
- CEDESA (Grassroots organization that supports sustainable agricultural development and water use in rural communities in La Cuenca)
- El Charco del Ingenio (Local nature preserve with extensive outreach capabilities)
- El Colegio de México – Dept. of Epidemiology
- University of San Luis Potosi – Dept. of Hydrogeology

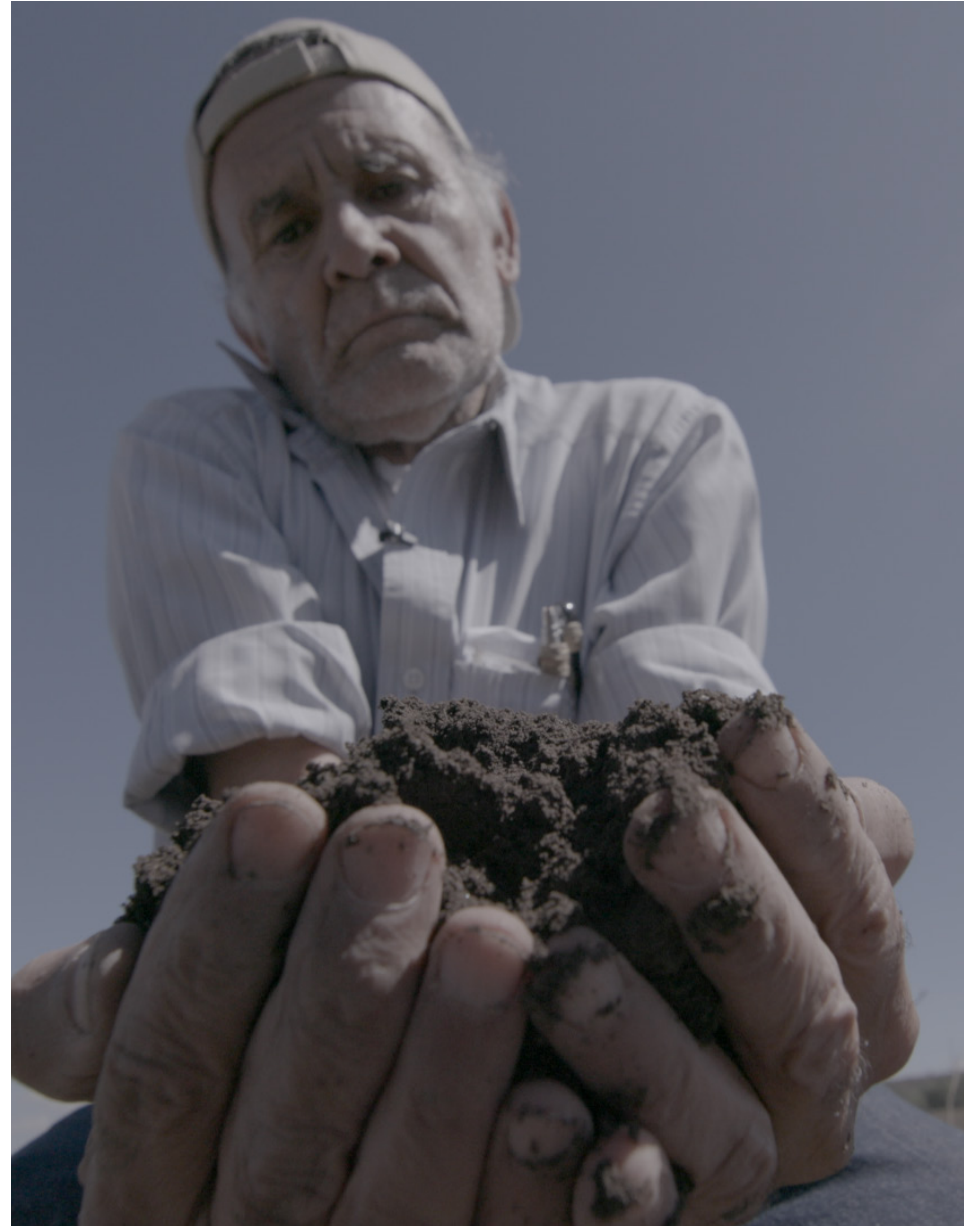
# Local and Regional Impact

The biggest priority for *The Age of Water* is simple: to make this story accessible to the communities experiencing similar issues. After significant interest at Good Pitch, *The Age of Water* team is working to create a Latin American screening strategy in partnership with Ambulante (in Mexico and Colombia) as well as Cine Vagabundo, both traveling film festivals of varying size. It is paramount that communities that are staring down the barrel of this issue be the first to attend screenings in their area.

By pushing towards accessible and traveling screenings, *The Age of Water* can target an audience that will benefit first-hand from its galvanizing potential. By securing local press to cover these screenings we can also provide small communities like La Cantera with a platform on which to stand.

Additionally, Radio Ambulante, the NPR podcast, is looking to feature the story behind *The Age of Water* in an episode that has the potential to reach approximately 160,000 Latin American listeners alone. This would access Latinx and other audiences in the US.

*The Age of Water's* second large-scale Latin American Screening efforts will center around the country's affluent population, by targeting large "A" festivals like DocsMX, the International Film Festivals in Guadalajara and Morelia, as well as the Guanajuato International Film Festival. A future partnership with Cinépolis Mexico will give us access to their free online streaming service, KLIC, which as of 2017 boast over 2 million subscribers.



# DIRECTORS' NOTE



It took moving away from our home for us to realize that Mexico raised us to be storytellers. Its deep roots stretched out over our childhood and created a pair of filmmakers that hold their home and its colors close to their hearts. However, it's become increasingly overwhelming to witness the crisis enveloping this region of Mexico today, let alone witness it from afar. So, doing the thing we do best, we realized we could craft a narrative that tells the story of Mexico's parched earth, resilient mothers and its stubborn, broken government. For us, *The Age of Water* speaks to a Latinx audience, in the first person, about the huge cultural cost of doing nothing.

This film is not intended to be a voice for the voiceless, but rather a booming platform that galvanized ordinary communities to stand up against the exploitation of their homeland.

– Isabel and Alfredo Alcántara

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