

# One Person Can Make A Difference

At 50 years old, Algoma University student Joanne Robertson is taking on the biggest challenge of her life. Her goal is to ensure that all First Nation communities in Canada have safe drinking water.

Her mission began in March of 2009 after attending a Community Economic and Social Development (CESD) class at Algoma University where the topic of discussion was human rights. "At the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Canada was the only one to vote against water as a human right. I was shocked by this," says Robertson. "Water is a human right. It is necessary to sustain all life."

As a student studying Graphic Design and Native Arts & Culture, Robertson wanted to use what she had learned from both the CESD program and Shingwauk Kinoomage Gamig to make a difference and draw attention to the dire need of many First Nation communities in Canada who go without life's basic necessity. "We've all heard about Walkerton, but have we heard about the First Nation communities that go without safe drinking water?" Robertson questions. "1 in 6 First Nation communities in Canada are on a boil-water advisory."

A research assignment presented Robertson with the inspiration to begin her campaign. While writing a paper for her Modern Arts class in March 2009, she saw a Guy Limone art installation that used plastic figurines and blood red paint to show how many people had been murdered in New York City. She connected with the piece immediately, and very quickly developed the core of the Empty Glass for Water campaign. "The idea came to me within 20 minutes," she explains, "I knew that I needed to attach a symbol to those who were invisible."

That symbol was an empty glass, 350 of which she has personally mailed for students and community members to the Prime Minister of Canada, the first being mailed in the spring of 2009, the day after the idea struck her. "The empty glasses represent individuals that are living without access to clean drinking water. I wanted the symbol to be something physical, that couldn't be shredded, but at the same time fragile,

like the children in our communities who live without this precious gift."

Robertson is unaware of how many glasses have been sent. "It started out as one idea, but it's definitely a community campaign now," she proudly states. "The Algoma University community has been behind this campaign from the beginning. The Shingwauk Aboriginal Student Association (SASA) and the Algoma University Student Union (AUSU) both support the campaign, and it has recently been unanimously supported by the Canadian Federation of Students.

The success of the campaign has reached the highest levels of government, since Chief Dean Sayers of Batchewana First Nation and Chief Laurie Carr of Hiawatha First Nation first helped her to submit resolutions to the Assembly of First Nations and the Chiefs in Ontario. The resolutions were adopted without opposition by the Assembly of First Nations in September of 2009. In December of 2009 Chief Dean Sayers hand-delivered a glass to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and a glass was hand-delivered via Josephine Mandamin, Mother Earth Water Walker, to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty.

When asked about how far the Empty Glass for Water campaign has come in such a short period of time, Robertson is humble. "I haven't personally left campus to promote it, so it still feels surreal," she says. "I want to keep it grassroots." To do so, Robertson organizes fundraising events to raise money for the campaign. She has enlisted student help to create a film (Glass Action, available on YouTube) and is in the process of developing a website ([www.emptyglassforwater.ca](http://www.emptyglassforwater.ca)) that will allow supporters to inform her about glasses they send, as well as track water ceremonies worldwide. "Greet, pray and leave tobacco at all bodies of water. We need to show our gratitude and respect for the water," says Robertson.

As a graduating student of the Algoma University class of 2010, Robertson is starting to look beyond graduation, but feels very passionate about the continuation of the Empty Glass for Water campaign. "I came to



I want clean drinking water for all communities.

CHERYL SUGGASHIE, OJIBWE ANISHINAABE KWE  
NORTHERN ONTARIO FIRST NATION COMMUNITY

Support the Empty Glass for Water Campaign:

Mail an EMPTY GLASS FOR WATER to:

Office of the Prime Minister  
80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa  
K1A 0A2

Let us know you sent in your glass:  
Facebook group: Empty Glass for Water  
[joanne@emptyglassforwater.ca](mailto:joanne@emptyglassforwater.ca)

Greet, pray & leave tobacco at all bodies of water.



post-secondary education later in life," she says, "but it's been a great experience for me. I was overwhelmed, with the launch of the campaign, how generous people can be with their time and efforts, and I am so grateful to have had this experience. I want it to flourish even after my time here, and hope that the momentum it has achieved can be sustained." Robertson realizes the enormity of the task, "This month the federal government introduced new drinking water legislation for First Nations. Bill S-11 provides no guarantees that drinking water infrastructure will be improved," she emphatically adds "there is much work to be done."

Photograph by Joanne Robertson 2009

Joanne Robertson