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NEWS

Co-founders of Paper for Water reflect on 15 years of clean water advocacy

Sisters Isabelle and Katherine Adams co-founded the nonprofit to support water accessibility projects across the globe through origami.

By [Alyda Muela](#), Staff Writer

July 21, 2026

 Gift Article





Collection of origami displayed during Coffee and Conversations event by Paper for Water, a nonprofit bringing clean water to thirsty communities around the world, on Thursday, July 16, 2026 at their office in Dallas.

Shafkat Anowar/The Dallas Morning News

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Account



Co-founders of Paper for Water reflect on 15 years of clean water advocacy

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Isabelle and Katherine Adams believe water is the first step to independence.

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“The reason for water is just because without it, you can’t grow food, you can’t go to school, and you can’t do anything else,” Isabelle Adams said. “There’s just so many other benefits that come with getting clean water.”

When the sisters were 8 and 5 years old, they spent hours repeatedly folding the creases of paper ornaments, hoping to sell the traditional origami crafts to raise \$500 dollars for a water access project in Ethiopia. They raised nearly \$800 on their first day and an estimated \$4,600 by the end of the month.

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The pair had no clue they were about to become [co-CEOs of an organization](#) that has now raised over \$3.5 million for water projects across the globe.

It’s been 15 years since the two sold their first ornament and Katherine Adams, 20, a pre-med biology major at SMU, paused her studying Thursday to attend Paper for Water’s Coffee and Conversations event.

As the co-founder of the nonprofit, she makes every effort to stay involved, even in the midst of summer classes.

“I think I often can be a Debbie Downer about stuff going on in the world, but I think being in this space has been really encouraging,” she said. “It has shown me the depth and breadth of all the people who care about making the world a better place.”



Guests sign up during Coffee and Conversations event by Paper for Water, a nonprofit bringing clean water to thirsty communities around the world, on Thursday, July 16, 2026 at their office in Dallas.

Shafkat Anowar/The Dallas Morning News

Growth

At the start, Paper for Water's staff consisted of the Adams family and their home served as the base of operations.

Today, the organization includes countless volunteers, a Change Maker youth council and two chapters across North Texas schools.

The group will host its annual event Nov. 5 at the Museum of Biblical Arts, where donors, volunteers and community members will hear from speakers to learn more about folding and giving.

Claire Wang, 21, started the University of Texas at Dallas' Paper for Water chapter in 2024. Wang, who had previously volunteered for the organization when she was in high school, said she established the club after learning about the lack of interest in hobbies from other students.

"I asked around during my freshman year, 'What hobbies do you have?' And a lot of people would say, 'Doomscroll on my phone,'" she said. "So, I thought how nice it would be if I gave them a reason to spend their time doing something more fruitful."

For Wang and other students, the club has provided them with a space to create and give to a greater cause.

Change Maker youth council

William Braskamp began volunteering for Paper for Water when he was eight years old. The 16-year-old is now the president of the youth council, which he has been a part of since its inauguration in 2019.

The youth leadership council is responsible for directing fundraisers and events like North Texas Giving Day, folding origami and attending craft events.



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Most recently, the group helped coordinate and make possible Paper for Water's Freedom to Play installation at Galleria Dallas.

"It's based on the World Cup and we wanted to celebrate soccer and the ways that clean water enables kids to play because they have the time, they're not hauling water and they're not sick," he said.

Hanging above the ice rink are 600 red, white and blue origami stars and 12-sided soccer themed spheres showcasing each participating country's flag.

It took 740 volunteer hours to complete all of the folding for the exhibition, which will be on display until Sept. 6.

Their impact

In its almost 15-year run, Paper for Water has funded 393 water projects providing continuous access to clean water to more than 157,000 people across the United States, North and South America, Africa and Asia.

The organization currently has 21 remaining projects to fund this year, which includes an ongoing effort to bring clean, uncontaminated water and septic systems to the Navajo Nation in New Mexico.

In June, nonprofit leaders and members of the youth council traveled to Kenya to visit four project sites.

The Upendo Kids Village is one of the four sites Katherine Adams visited with the group. She reflected on the changes she saw in the orphanage that houses grade-school aged children to young adults.

“Before they had a water well, they would go to a river that would sometimes run dry. It was dirty and contaminated. They would also try to buy water which was really expensive,” she said.



Katherine Adams, co-CEO of Paper for Water, talks to guests during Coffee and Conversations event by the nonprofit that brings clean water to thirsty communities around the world, on Thursday, July 16, 2026 at their office in Dallas.

Shafkat Anowar/The Dallas Morning News

Paper for Water installed a well, a solar-powered pump and an elevated storage tank in 2023, which has given the community clean drinking water and has allowed them to irrigate crops, water livestock and decrease their food budget by 60%.

"I was so blown away and it reminded me that water truly is the first step to escaping the cycle of poverty because it gives so much freedom, and they really took that and ran with it," she said.

For Braskamp, the trips to project sites are rewarding but emotionally taxing at times.

"On one hand, you see the amazing change that we've provided them. But on the other, you see that there's still so much need," he said.

The future

The Adams sisters aren't shy about their desire to pursue careers outside of Paper for Water. Both sisters chose college majors unrelated to their philanthropic roots.

Isabelle Adams recently graduated from Agnes Scott College with a degree in political science and math-physics. She wants to continue a path in academia with a focus on conducting research in astrophysics.

Katherine Adams hopes to attend medical school after she graduates from SMU. Like Isabelle Adams, she wants to continue on a career path separate from Paper for Water.

"Our goal is to continue making an impact for as long as we can and whatever that looks like, I will be happy with it, but it's hard to say," Katherine Adams said.



Isabelle Adams, co-CEO of Paper for Water, speaks during Coffee and Conversations event by the nonprofit that brings clean water to thirsty communities around the world, on Thursday, July 16, 2026 at their office in Dallas.

Shafkat Anowar/The Dallas Morning News

Since the sisters entered college, the organization has relied heavily on the work of volunteers and the youth council.

Questions about the future of Paper for Water have lingered since Isabelle Adams graduated from high school.

"It's not just me and Katherine, it can sustain itself even if we are not around to run it," she said. "Which is really exciting to me because a huge part of what I think made Paper for Water special, is this idea of kids helping kids and we're not exactly kids anymore."

Paper for Water has grown with Isabelle and Katherine. Like them, the organization has matured enough to stand on its own with the support of the community the Adams sisters have built.

July 21, 2026



Alyda Muela

LOCAL GOVERNMENT INTERN



Originally from El Paso, Alyda recently graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso with a BA in multimedia journalism and a minor in general business. After working at her university's student publication, she interned for the local public radio station KTEP and Puente News Collaborative, a nonprofit news organization covering the U.S.-Mexico border.

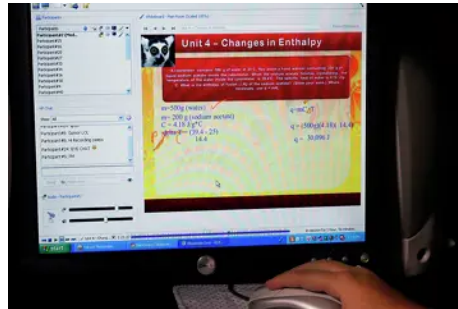
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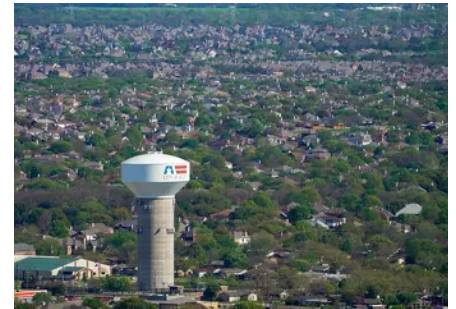
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