

55th Session of the Commission for Social Development – Side Event

LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND: THE WRESINSKI APPROACH, 60 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

Wednesday, February 8, 2017 | 1:15 – 2:45 p.m
Room 8, United Nations Headquarters New York

When I was first exposed to the Movement ATD Fourth World 25 years ago, it was like a distraction. Distraction from the drugs, alcohol, violence, vulgarity, disrespect, and hopelessness that radiates throughout poverty. I met the Movement through my children's involvement in the Street Library. It was a time when most households didn't have any computer access. The Movement came around with computers, and the kids were attracted and they'd do the Street Library. The ATD volunteers were a group of people that took an interest in giving the children something positive to do in a fun way. They helped them to open their minds and learn that there were other things besides being around the guns, the drugs, and all the negative things that line the streets of people living in poverty. They were showing them another way to think. They were helping the children.

I observed my children and my mom more and more happily welcoming this distraction, and it turned into a welcomed attraction. As the Movement was consistent with their visiting, trust developed, and sharing experiences grew. The volunteers shared what they did in their lives, and we shared what we did in ours. Bonding was inevitable, as the Movement exposed us to life other than poverty. They accompanied us in school issues with our children, funerals, housing problems, and celebrations of all sorts. The Movement encouraged us to speak up, and we all did more and more.

Father Joseph Wresinski said people have the right to be heard. I know he wanted people in poverty to have a voice, and if they needed help with having that voice he wanted to supply the help. With the Fourth World, you're sharing, you're bonding, you're exchanging. Once you get freer with your sharing, they ask if you'd like to come read your testimony. It goes in steps. First you come to some meetings. You don't even know, but you're being prepared to speak up. Your voice is being heard. As you become more comfortable with your voice being heard, you start to feel more important, start to feel more "all together in dignity." That's how I came to speak at the United Nations.

The testimonies at the United Nations were extremely empowering because not only were you speaking up, but there was an overwhelming adrenaline rush of being heard as well. You had a powerful "I am somebody and I can make a difference" boldness about yourself. You looked to God and you thanked him, because this was and always would be a very positive motivating force within your life.

The Fourth World people and the church are both positive forces in my life. As I moved further from the drugs and alcohol, I began organizing annual block parties. Through that, I met local politicians. The Fourth World Movement was trying to get a seat in the political process in Washington, and I was meeting these politicians, and I saw that they were all fighters. When you're surrounded by those people, you want to be like that as well. Being around positive people makes you want to be more positive.

At the Street Library, I learned that there's always somebody that's hidden inside or there's always somebody needing help, and you won't know if you don't knock on their door. Sometimes the knocking is how you come to realize that people are sitting inside because they're scared of going outside. But when there was something more positive, they were willing to come out. And once the child is out, a lot of the time the parents

also get involved to some extent. If you don't reach out, nobody will know you're there. You have to reach out, and then after a while people expect you to be there. It gives kids and parents something to look forward to. These are people that otherwise would be left behind, because the people who wouldn't be left behind aren't around anyway. You'll never know who is the most isolated or the most in need if you don't go searching.

People want to better the community, but a lot of times they don't know how to go about it. That's why advocacy is important — not everybody knows how to do something they want to do; they might try and do it the wrong way. Just a little bit of help can go a long way. In some programs, you don't feel the dignity or feel that we're "all together" in anything. You're all to you, I'm all to me, and I'm just here not doing anything because I don't have a choice. You want to feel like you're important. That's the difference in the Fourth World.

Today, I'm on the US Board of Directors of ATD Fourth World. I was also part of the discernment group to choose the new International Leadership Team for the Fourth World. Both times, I felt honored to participate. Every step of the way, I felt important, like I matter, like I'm somebody. I felt my integrity. I felt it, and I felt like I was sharing something that was important, not only to me but to the Movement as a whole, to people as a whole. I felt a sense of inclusion in things that are going on in life that matter in the fight that Joseph Wresinski started. I feel like I'm included in this fight in a different way now, but an important way. That's why I so wanted to be included when I was asked. From my experience in the discernment group, I learned stronger leadership skills and I enhanced my communication skills. With the board, and even more with the discernment group, what I took from that, when all was said and done, you're not going to understand everything in life. Some things just have to be done, and you're not going to understand everything that happens. You might understand some things, and some you might never understand, but that's not what's important. The most important thing in life is to continue to strive, continue to persevere, and never give up.