

ALEX BEGAY, UNITED NATIONS, OCTOBER 17, 2017 / ATD FOURTH WORLD

YA'AT'EEH. MY NAME is Alex Begay. I'm a proud citizen of Navajo Nation. I am from Gallup, New Mexico. My mother's clan is Honeycomb Rock. My father's clan is Bitter Water. My paternal grandfather's clan is Towering House.

I GREW UP in poverty all my life. My mother passed on when I was very young, and I have no memory of her. My siblings and I were placed in foster care. My father remarried and got us back when I was ten years old. But soon after, he was incarcerated, and we were placed in the care of my stepmother. I love her like my birth mother. She had to work two jobs to support us and it was difficult for her to have us all together at once. So she placed half of us in boarding school. I was 13 and stayed there until I was 17 years old.

In high school, I would be bothered by other people getting picked on or harassed, so I would stick up for them. I would make my way to become someone's friend because they might need help.

Sometimes I would go to a friend's house and ask if they want to hang out. I would be invited in to warm up, just out of love and consideration. I would be asked if I were hungry or thirsty and they would show me hospitality. In my culture, that is a way of respect. Even being called "Shi yahzi," my little one, has a lot of meaning. I like that feeling of being accepted.

Now I return that kindness to others, even a stranger who might have gotten kicked out or lost their family. It saddens me when people get ignored. Most people would say, "Get a Job," when there's not really much jobs available, or your background is not suitable for a job. I know how it is. That's why Lucretia and I would pass out sandwiches in the alleys if people were hungry. The little that we had, we offered to share. I understand how it feels to have nothing. That's just my way of giving back to my community.

Lucretia is my companion and we have two children. Life is still very hard. Even working minimum wage isn't enough to save up to rent an apartment. We lived in motels, we

stayed with relatives and friends, but it was over-crowded. You have to be married to live together in one room in a shelter. We did not want to be separated. It should just be about families that want to stay together.

When we were trying to seek help, there were a lot of barriers that made it complicated: we needed hospital records, background checks, immunizations. There was always a waiting list. We would get approved but wait a couple weeks or months to get help, when we desperately needed the help right then and there.

Then we moved to Lucretia's grandparents' house, far from town. It's a one-bedroom house, with no electricity or running water. The flooring is incomplete. But still it was something grand to us. We finally had a place to call home. It was good for a couple months, but we didn't feel safe there. I try to give a sense of peace and security to my children, even though the environment we lived in wasn't safe.

MY FAMILY MET ATD Fourth World at the Story Garden, a weekly program for children and families to share learning experiences like reading and doing activities. We came with a story of our own. I noticed that my life is somewhat like a garden itself.

As parents, Lucretia and I were the soil of the garden. We had to break the ground and get the rocks out of the soil in our lives before we could plant our seed, which are my kids. I really want my kids to learn and grow even though we are going through hardships and hard times. It takes a lot of patience, nurturing and responsibility to care for a garden. We have to maintain the sunlight and water in order for our garden to grow. We must remove the weeds to make us stronger so our garden will bloom and blossom.

We're all people, no matter our ethnicity. Everyone struggles, whether you live in a reservation or in the big city. I want to encourage other families to stay strong. We are struggling to live up to our hopes, hoping for peace.

Thank you