

Everybody can Learn If...”

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Success stories in the field of education

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STORY GARDEN: INSPIRING INDIVIDUALS, STRENGTHENING FAMILIES, TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

ATD Fourth World in New Mexico (USA) has been hosting a weekly, intergenerational, family literacy space at the open-air flea market in Gallup since 2012. This market is an economic and social hub for the rural populations of the area, who frequent the market to buy and sell goods and reconnect with family and friends. This project, called Story Garden, takes place every Saturday from about 10 AM to 4 PM. It fosters engagement with children and families through books, games, computers, and art. It's a space of peace and learning, reinforcing the efforts families make and developing deep relationships to break the isolation of poverty.

This narrative recounts the development of the Story Garden project, from the inception of the team to their initial triumphs. The community's contribution to the project's creation and success stands out as one of the most notable achievements.

The Context

As of December 2023, ATD has been operating in New Mexico for thirteen years. Our team is located in Gallup, nestled in the northwestern corner of the state at the border of the Navajo Nation, which stands as the largest land area held by a Native American tribe in the U.S. Encompassing 27,000 square miles (69,923 square kilometers), this region is more than twice the size of Belgium and encompasses portions of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The reservation comprises 173,000 Navajo residents. Other nearby tribal nations include Hopi, Southern Ute, Apache, and Zuni Pueblo.

It is a vast and rural area, where the closest large city — Albuquerque, New Mexico — is over 200 miles away. More than half the population of the Navajo Nation does not have running water or electricity.

Gallup is a critical commercial and social hub for the surrounding region, attracting residents from nearby communities for shopping and other services. For example, given much of the Navajo Nation is a "food desert" (with only thirteen grocery stores), a trip to Gallup is essential for some. On weekends, the town of just under 22,000 swells to double or triple its size. It is also a very diverse town; 45% of the population is Native American, and 32% identifies as Hispanic.

Establishing the team and launching the project

The team that embarked on this journey thirteen years ago comprised several ATD International Volunteer Corps members: my husband, Harold (French), Charo, Vladi (both Peruvian), and myself (from the East Coast of the US). Upon our arrival, we explored the area, the landscape, and the communities around Gallup. During this period, we were simply present, assisting other organizations, meeting people, and trying to grasp the nuances of our surroundings.

It is my country, but everything felt unfamiliar. As foreigners in this place, we faced many questions and uncertainties: What projects should we consider planning in such an expansive area with a dispersed population? How can we connect with people? Where do community members already gather?

Our exploration led us to the Gallup flea market, a pivotal gathering place in the region. The flea market, held weekly on Saturdays, is where families sell various items — often relying on this as their primary source of income. For many, it is their livelihood when other stable work is unavailable. Upon recognizing the significance of the flea market and after a year and a half of learning from and working with other community organizations, we launched the Story Garden in March 2012.

The Story Garden Space

We set up the space every Saturday morning between 9:30 and 10:00 and spend the day there. It somewhat resembles a stand or stall in the flea market — like any other vendor would have — except it's free, welcoming to all, and we offer nothing to sell.

We welcome everyone from babies just a few months old to grandparents over 80. As a result, the space needs to be comfortable for all ages. We've arranged a reading space with books and rubber mats, offering a comfortable area for younger children, babies, and toddlers. Nearby is our art table, providing artistic activities children can engage in throughout the day. Towards the back, a colorful trailer serves as a quiet reading space and an area where kids come together to play. We place a heater inside as it can get to below zero degrees (C°) on some days. However, most of our activities take place outside: the families are outside, so we are outside too.

In the center, there's a round table that was donated to us, and we've observed that its round shape encourages collaboration among participants. It's a space where they engage in puzzles, games, and various activities together. There's also a puppet theater, which allows children to create and perform puppet shows. A computer with educational games and a touch screen is also available. On one side, there's a table that offers a variety of books for adults to enjoy. It is the elders or parents of very young children who prefer to sit on that side. We've added a bench, recognizing that many great-grandparents and older individuals weren't comfortable entering the space because of mobility issues. Now this bench, called the 'bench of the elders,' allows them to sit on the edge comfortably. There is also a sandbox where kids can play. It's crucial to us that children and families have choices when they come so that they can decide what they feel like

doing on any given day. Visitors may stay for as little as five minutes or as long as the entire day. It's entirely up to them, and we welcome all visitors.

Our Facilitators

A team of ATD Volunteer Corps members and allies facilitates the space. The team's composition changes over time but always mirrors the area's linguistic and cultural diversity. We collaborate with guest facilitators from the local community. Particularly students from the literacy program at the University of New Mexico's Adult Education Center, one of the partners with whom we have developed other initiatives.

Over the years, we have welcomed approximately 25 facilitators, some contributing once and others frequently.

A Success to Learn From

A 2016-2017 participatory evaluation of the Story Garden sheds light on three key points of positive transformation: children, families, and the community.

As reported by adult family members, Story Gardens strengthens families by providing a space to develop the building blocks that foster meaningful and continuous learning (social-emotional, academic-cognitive, creative, and curiosity-inducing) for all family members — children and adults alike. This field of success includes any outcome that equips the family to overcome everyday challenges, supports and encourages mutual educational and other goals, and facilitates the co-creation of meaningful opportunities within the community.

To illustrate the impact on families, I would like to share the story of Esther, a grandmother, and her family. Over time, our relationship with her slowly deepened.

We met Esther when the Story Garden at the flea market eventually led to a second Story Garden in her community of Gamerco. For a few years, Esther co-facilitated a mobile Story Garden in Gamerco, extending its reach to different parts of the community. She continues to be instrumental in outreach efforts and building trust with new families.

In Esther's case, after five years of participation in the Story Garden, she observed positive social-emotional and academic growth among her grandchildren, as well as a surge in creativity and innovative approaches to academic challenges.

She credits the Story Garden for giving her the idea and inspiration to change how she organizes family time at home. She said she observed the facilitators engage with her grandchildren, which gave her ideas about how to change their family routine. While she is the primary caregiver for two grandchildren, she often has additional grandchildren staying with her for periods of time. When the kids would come home from school, she turned off the TV and put away the devices

and tablets. She would set aside her cooking or cleaning, and instead she'd bring out activities and books and spend quality time with her grandchildren. She already had the ability and motivation, but the Story Garden inspired her to put it into action in her own home.

It also inspired her to continue her education. Witnessing her grandchildren's efforts to learn to read inspired her to accompany them in their learning. She enrolled in the adult education center to gain reading and writing skills; her rapid progress motivated and supported her grandchildren as they continued their education.

Esther also saw such dramatic improvements in her grandchildren that she wanted to continue the experience and share it with her community. We followed her lead as she began a Story Garden in her neighborhood. This partnership developed into a mobile Story Garden, where Esther led outreach and facilitation. ATD supported her with staff, materials, and other resources.

This was a significant observation that Esther and other parents expressed to us: that over time, Story Gardens can gradually inspire tangible changes within the wider flea market environment, schools, and families.

“Before” and “After” the Success

Families say they had little positive time together before coming to the Story Garden. Families going through separation (i.e., foster care) find that the Story Garden provides a rare space for fun and togetherness during family visitation.

Before the Story Garden, families say they had few opportunities to express pride in each other. Now, children see parents in a positive light, and adults feel and express pride for their children.

Before the Story Garden, adult family members say they often felt powerless and hopeless when faced with everyday challenges. They now report increased agency with more hope in their housing, education, and employment goals.

Before the Story Garden, many adults said they lacked purpose and meaning in their lives. Today, some of these adults aim to co-create meaningful opportunities for the community, like hosting a Story Garden in their neighborhood or striving to learn a vocation for the betterment of the community.

The children brought their experiences from the Story Garden to the outside world, especially in school. Here are two examples:

A parent shared an interesting anecdote about her child, Taliana, and her teacher. The teacher approached the mom and remarked on Taliana's positive transformation at school. The teacher noted that she had become more open, friendly, and helpful to others. Surprisingly, the teacher asked the parent what she was doing differently at home to contribute to this change. However, the mother revealed that they had made no specific changes at home, attributing Taliana's positive development to her experiences over the previous few years at the Story Garden and how it built up her self-confidence.

Another example is a grandparent named Sandy, who shared a similar observation. From her stand across from us, she witnessed the children's growth over several years. She mentioned that the children's behavior had changed since the inception of Story Garden. She highlighted the children were now more polite, expressing appreciation and helping their families. Initially surprised, I questioned Sandy's credit to Story Garden, as we never explicitly taught the children manners. However, Sandy clarified that while we may not teach them verbally, our actions speak volumes. We naturally exhibit politeness by saying please and thank you and assisting one another. According to Sandy, the children pick up on these behaviors and adopt them in their interactions in the broader flea market community. This reminded me of Taliana, who learned a positive way of being in the Story Garden space and brought it to her interactions with others at school.

Before the Story Garden, ATD Fourth World was unknown to the local community. Now, we have gained recognition and respect throughout the region. Before the Story Garden, we had few relationships with families impacted by poverty and knew little of their situations. Now, ATD Fourth World has strong relationships with many families. We have gained valuable knowledge from them, which we continue to use to improve our practices and guide our programs.

Turning Points

A significant turning point occurred in 2016, when there was a change in the flea market's management. Our carport and storage area became unavailable, and our space became exposed to the elements and uncomfortable. In response, Andy, a vendor, said, "Don't worry, we'll make something better." A collaborative effort followed, involving vendors, children, parents, and grandparents (including Esther). They all played a role in building and beautifying our new space.

Andy donated a trailer, and David came out after work to tow it to the Story Garden space. Drew redid the drywall, and Esther and others sanded and painted it. Brandy donated decorations and an electric heater, and Adam donated a rug for the interior. Harry and four young men built a wooden structure for shade. Notably, Andy advocated for the Story Garden to the new management, insisting that we continue to keep our space and access to free electricity. There was a strong sense of community ownership of the Story Garden, an experience we had not encountered to this extent before.

In our second year at the Story Garden, we introduced a small donation box with a sign suggesting that donations were welcome, placed discreetly to ensure it didn't create the impression of an entry fee. To our surprise, a man living in difficult conditions approached us and shared, "I've always tried to show my children that I love them. We're no longer in touch; they don't talk to me anymore. But what you're doing is important. I wanted them to know that I love them." He emptied his pockets, donating all the money he had left, including coins, into the box. For us, having this donation box became a source of shared pride. The funds collected were used to purchase a computer, which we shared with everyone, emphasizing that the community had made the purchase possible.

What particularly amazed me around the fourth year was the consistent stream of people bringing materials to us. A notable example is the bench for the elders, skillfully crafted by Harry, a 70-year-old carpenter who had once been a student and intern at the adult education center. He handed us the bench, urging us to keep it for the project. Harry believed the Story Garden could serve as a haven for preserving language and culture (hence the bench). Identifying as Navajo, he expressed concerns about the preservation of the Navajo language, noting that while the younger generation understands the language to some extent, they don't speak it fluently. To address this, he committed to sharing Navajo stories with the children at the Story Garden. He told us about his rough childhood, a time when speaking Navajo led to punishment, and the government forcibly sent Navajo children to English-speaking boarding schools.

From running a program to integrating into the community. Another turning point occurred when a series of vendors we didn't know donated supplies to us. Concurrently, people in the broader community that we'd never met previously would mention seeing us at the flea market or hearing about Story Garden. Parent vendors would say they now sell at the Gallup flea market more often because their children insist on coming to the Story Garden. Through these experiences, we realized that our space was more than a separate "stand" at the flea market: it had become an integrated part of the community, and we, as facilitators, were part of that community too.

After we realized this, we started walking around the flea market more often, making our space more welcoming to elders, groups of developmentally disabled adults, and others without children. We even began attending the flea market during inclement weather. You can actively take part in the community and remain present even when setup is impossible. When you are part of a community, your perspective changes, your role is different, and you are not just "running a program."

Detailing the Actions and the Principles Behind Them

Building trust with parents so they could see that they had something valuable to contribute to Story Garden was a long journey. People often doubted their ability to contribute to their community. Some believed that we had a better understanding than they did of how to nurture their children's learning effectively.

It became a process to convince them that this was not the case, that we needed them, and that they had value. They were skeptical, so the time invested in building that trust was crucial.

In those first years, the project at the flea market was about visibility, meeting families impacted by poverty, and showing our desire to be present and our eagerness to learn. It was a space for slowly building the relationships and credibility we would need to develop ATD Fourth World further in the years ahead. The primary goal was not to achieve immediate change, but to build the foundation for projects and programs to grow out of the community's aspirations — especially those most affected by poverty.

We, the Volunteer Corps members and other facilitators, welcomed every family who noticed our space while passing by. We invited all families to join in, allowing them the freedom to choose to take part at their convenience. There were some instances when we tried, over months, to spark a conversation with people who remained completely quiet, kept their eyes down, or looked away. Many times, a breakthrough in trust occurred, leading to some of our closest relationships today. We invited parents to use the space to relax and take a break from ongoing struggles and worries and expressed a genuine interest in people's lives and hopes. Our approach was purposeful, showing respect and kindness to each person. Esther said, "It's just family and warmth. You go to Story Garden, and you can be yourself. There's no judgment." On a typical Saturday, a facilitator may spend as much time engaging with adults as with children.

Even getting people to come into our space, especially in the beginning, when we didn't know them, was already quite a process. At some point, we decided that one of us had to be a greeter. It's not enough to be occupied with the people already there; someone needs to be outside the space to reach out and say, "Hey, how are you? Do you want to spend a minute?" One was a dad who came by with his three boys. They collected cans from the trash bins to sell for income. One day, I ran to the bin to meet this father because I knew he would never enter our space without being encouraged. And he looked at me, smiled, and I will never forget that moment. After that, he came with his boys. So many of our relationships with families experiencing poverty started like that.

We made ourselves and the space visible so parents could observe until they felt comfortable joining. For this reason, we have resisted suggestions to move the activity indoors or set up a mostly closed space to protect from harsh weather. Esther emphasizes the importance of this approach. Initially, she was skeptical of ATD Volunteers, unsure if we had an ulterior motive. She gradually developed trust by observing from a distance. Eventually, this trust led her to allow her grandchildren to take part and subsequently join herself.

Now we go anywhere. We go to schools and travel to locations two or three hours from Gallup. When we explain what we do, we often hear: 'Oh yes, I know you, I saw you there, I brought my child once.' We have become familiar faces, earning a certain legitimacy and recognition. The Story Garden space enables us to show not only our activities but also how we engage with community members from all backgrounds.

The space is joyful and comfortable, and both children and adults can spend time there. That means providing suitable seating for disabled adults and elders, offering inspiring books for adults, creating proper spaces and materials for infants and toddlers, shading them from the sun, and creating colorful and creative decorations. We clean the space and all materials weekly, as sand storms and other extreme weather are common in the high desert.

The ATD facilitators prepare every week. We try to ensure that the activities are engaging and that we, as facilitators, are constantly learning from experience. Parents mentioned their kids

experience various media and creative ideas that they don't encounter at school, such as creating [zoetropes](#), understanding the principles of filmmaking, and learning Japanese ink art. We employ a reflective practice (individual writing and team debriefs) to glean insights from adults and children at each Story Garden; this shapes our activities, which develop through this collective learning.

We incorporate our values in our encounters by showing respect and compassion, offering encouragement, support, and authenticity. We actively listen to families, giving them meaningful choices, and following their lead. We encourage children to help facilitators set up and develop ideas for activities.

We showcase accomplishments by sharing positive aspects about each child with their parents or grandparents. We acknowledge and celebrate the skills and abilities of the children with their families.

We also highlight the skills of parents in the eyes of their children. In Esther's case, we invited her to lead a weaving activity at the Story Garden upon discovering her basket-weaving skills in the initial year of her participation. This marked the beginning of her increasingly active role as a facilitator.

How do you convince parents that they have something to contribute to the Story Garden? As mentioned previously, it's a process. We may know a family faced with twenty challenges, but there are some strengths to discover behind those challenges. Learning what those strengths are over time and building on them with the family often has a transformative effect on the parents' demeanor. For me, it's always about acknowledging the parents' genuine skills and knowledge. We engage in this practice weekly, and gradually, people open up. What often happens is that they suddenly talk about the efforts they have made for their child, whether highlighting the child's strengths or the things they have tried to do to support their child's development. Through this relationship-building, they gradually see that they have things to contribute and that there is a lot that they are doing well. Often, with some time, parents bring up their questions, doubts, pains, and complicated issues. However, once they do, the dynamic is different because we have already established a connection based on their strengths and knowledge. Subsequently, we try to provide support and collectively seek solutions. For me, it is all interconnected, but initially, it involves forging connections around the family's strengths. This is pivotal.

We offer meaningful opportunities for family members to contribute their knowledge and skills to benefit their community. We ask community members for their help and expertise in building the Story Garden. We provide resources, encouragement, and transportation. We encourage guest facilitators (parents and grandparents) to overcome their fear of interacting with children, building their confidence in their abilities by recognizing that they have a lot to bring.

Guest facilitators have expressed that these experiences have boosted their self-esteem and brought their family closer together.

We assist families in progressing towards their aspirations. We have frequently observed families expressing a desire to contribute to their community and have tried to support these aspirations. For example: we partnered with Ester to create a Story Garden in her community.

We recognize the aspirations of struggling families and provide accompaniment and support. For example, Esther asked us to accompany her to her grandchildren's school for meetings. She wanted us to help her understand the information from the school staff, and to highlight her contributions to her grandchildren and community. Esther didn't know how to read and write when the Story Garden began, she told us later. Determined to enhance her abilities and support her grandchildren more effectively, she returned to school.

We strive to **understand the child's needs.** When faced with challenges during our activities, we asked ourselves, "What was the child trying to communicate to us on that day?" And yes, I still make mistakes; I make them repeatedly! By 'mistakes' I mean instances where a child displays challenging behavior, and we struggle to understand the underlying needs — what needs to change for the child to feel at ease. Let me illustrate with an example: We encountered a boy named Alex who displayed disruptive behavior. Ultimately, we asked him, "Do you want to leave? Come back later?" We were uncertain about what to do, and he left, frustrated, and did not return that day. This was not a success. Afterward, during our team discussion, we took the time to reflect and realized, "Wait, we overlooked the fact that Alex had repeatedly expressed a desire to spend individual time with a particular facilitator." Being occupied with many children, we neglected to provide him with that time. In hindsight, we wondered why we didn't simply adjust to the child's request. The following week, when I met Alex, I said, "We failed to listen to you last week when you wanted to spend time with only one facilitator. We're sorry about that, but we'll make sure you have the time today." And so we created the conditions for the facilitator to spend time with Alex. After twenty minutes of one-on-one time, Alex rejoined the group. Everything was fine after that; he didn't require more than that. Ultimately, children don't ask for much: they seek small gestures.

We view learning as collaborative and mutually uplifting: I often say to the children, "I am learning as much as all of you" "You have taught me something" I think it's essential because it highlights that we are all enriched through these shared learning experiences.

In 2016, our most significant partner in New Mexico was the Adult Education Center at the University of New Mexico. The adults that attend the center either had limited access to education growing up or could not complete secondary school and are now returning to the classroom. Many share similar backgrounds and environments with the children and families we meet at Story Garden. Through our collaboration with this group, we better understood the challenges faced by young adults striving for educational growth, seeking their secondary school

equivalency, and other related achievements. Students shared that this learning and personal development journey can sometimes create difficulties within the family dynamic. Based on our conversations, we've learned that family members often feel left behind when one family member is pursuing higher education. We frequently observe that individuals may either stay committed to their families or temporarily separate from them to continue their personal growth. This led us to wonder how to have spaces where learning can feel like a mutually uplifting endeavor, allowing all family members to grow and pursue their curiosity and interests.

Thoughts, Insights, and Unresolved Issues for Further Learning in 2018

- The flea market is only a geographical community on Saturdays, so bringing people together at other times is difficult. Some families live 4 or 5 hours away by car. How do we continue relationships outside of Story Garden times?
- The Story Garden aims to strengthen and deepen family ties. This is particularly significant during periods of parent-child separation, such as when a parent is incarcerated or when a child is in foster care. We have some experience accompanying families in those situations, but how can we do more to nurture family ties at these critical times?
- One success is the Story Garden's ability to restore adult family members' hopes and beliefs in building a future for their families. However, the material conditions of the families do not change quickly. Is the Story Garden lifting people's expectations for their future that leads to opportunities? Or does it create hope that becomes hard to act upon in an environment characterized by severe poverty and a lack of opportunities?