

ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps members share a common commitment to working together to build a more just world. They work full time alongside individuals and families facing challenges of persistent poverty and choose modest lifestyles, sharing resources, and receiving the same basic living stipend regardless of the length of their involvement or the job responsibility they hold. While coming from all different backgrounds, they work to build a society without exclusion.

Vincent Fanelli and Maria Sandvik have been ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps members for many years. Here, they tell about their experiences and actions over the years and a deep understanding they have of working together to build caring and inclusive communities.

Explore the life of ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps members & donate to support their ongoing commitment to the work and mission of ATD Fourth World!

VINCENT FANELLI

Vincent Fanelli has been a Volunteer Corps member since 1973. He is currently in the Appalachia region of Virginia where our team has been working to respond to the needs for education, employment, and healthcare. He coordinates the new workshop that offers introductory classes in solar energy and robotics, to support the efforts of tackling high unemployment.

Vincent: When I first began in New York, the team had a pre-school program in a tenement basement and a drop in apartment in the same tenement. They had built relationships in the neighborhood with parents, their children and the teenagers whose life was mainly in the street. I was able to work mostly with the young people, helping them to find jobs, advocating for them when they had court cases and helping out in a neighborhood alternative school. Living in the neighborhood and daily contact with its population were a learning experience which anchored my commitment to ATD and its Volunteer Corps.

One of my favorite memories of that time was the summer family vacation program. We were able to use places in rural New Jersey and Upstate New York to give families an extended weekend in a country setting. Children discovering nature, parents relaxing and times to know each other. These were privileged times to understand the lives of the families away from the often chaotic urban life.

Fanchette and I were married in 1975 and in 1986, we left New York to find a place for a national center. At the same time we worked on our book, "The Human Face of Poverty," based on the writings of the Volunteers Corps members from New York. We found a property near Washington, D.C, and with other Volunteers, we renovated it for office space and living space.

In 1991, we went to the international center in France where we worked with information and communication projects. It was an important time to renew contacts and understand more fully the global aspect of ATD Fourth World Movement. (Read more)

MARIA SANDVIK

Maria Sandvik started in 2001. She is currently one of two National Directors in the USA. After her experiences of community building in New York and New Orleans, and briefly with International Relations, she has taken on the role of supporting the US teams' projects and to help develop a larger picture vision of the organization through strategy planning, fundraising, defining priorities, and other areas.

Maria: I also started in New York, helping out with family summer vacation experiences, Festivals of Learning and joining the Street Libraries that had been going on for many years. Shortly before I arrived, ATD Fourth World members had held a seminar where parents and teachers of children participating in Street Library, Street Library facilitators, and university professors in the education field worked together on how to build a better learning environment, one which unleashes the potential of all children. As a recent graduate with a teacher's degree, I worked to present the very strong knowledge and stories that came out of that seminar and preparation processes.

Meanwhile, the New York team was in a discovery process for a meaningful, under-resourced community in which to invest ourselves. With another much more experienced Volunteer Corps member we spent time getting to know people in a new neighborhood and learning with people there what types of educational enhancement programs they hoped their children would have access to. That was the beginning of the Street Library in Ocean Hill, Brooklyn.

After 3 years in New York I was asked to join the International Relations team at ATD Fourth World's International Headquarters in France. There I worked in the field of representation and political advocacy and supported our work at the United Nations and with government officials.

Then, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005. It blew my mind and I was ready to be part of the long work of supporting people whose lives were turned upside down due to flooding, displacement, and trauma. ATD Fourth World already had a nearly 20 year history in New Orleans and it wasn't hard to see that the families who faced challenges related to poverty before the hurricane...(Read more)

Vincent: (Continued) After four years in France, we felt the need to start anew in the U.S. and the opportunity arrived as a result of ATD Fourth World Family Congress in New York in 1994. A delegate, Sister Bernie Kenny, got an old frame house in Virginia donated to ATD Fourth World. In 2004, thanks to a generous grant and support from fellow Volunteers and the community members, we began the construction of the Learning Co-op. We have stayed there up to the present. The story of our time in Appalachia is still on-going and will have to wait for another occasion to be told.

Maria: (Continued) were at an even greater risk of being isolated in the rebuilding. When everything in the city was rebuilding, my mission was to connect families and friends displaced all over the country. We traveled to bring videos, photos, and messages between friends, family, and neighbors who later wrote the book, "Not Meant to Live Like This." The book brings together the strong stories people have to tell from before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. Until I joined the National Leadership team, I remained in New Orleans as our team focused on community rebuilding efforts, particularly in neighborhoods receiving less attention.

WHAT MADE YOU STAY IN VOLUNTEER CORPS OVER THE YEARS UP UNTIL NOW?

V: It wasn't money, that's true! (Laughs). It's difficult to answer.

M: Me too, I've been thinking about it for the past few days and it's difficult to answer.

V: Yes, you don't think about it. You just go ahead and do it. There's something inside you that pushes you.

M: Do you have an idea about what that something is, Vincent? For me I find such value in the ideals that we are trying to build; the ideal that regardless of our lot in life, we are able to know and enrich one another. It's something that doesn't happen very easily in our world. The ideal that however different our lives are, our lives can be richer when we are with other people. We do it a lot in ATD Fourth World.

For me that's a part of the reasons why I stayed. We have times like the Annual Meeting, where people whose lives are very different come together and you can see that everybody in the room has a very positive three hours together. Those positive three hours affect people in a longer term. I want to keep being a part of making that happen. I've been fortunate to see and hear people say how having encountered people whose lives are so different from theirs, people who don't come together easily in our world, changes them. For me that's so worthwhile. I want to keep being a part of those encounters that are very valuable and affect our lives, our communities.

V: Basically I don't see myself doing anything else. Like Maria said, you reflect as you go along, you meet people in poverty and reflect on their experiences and how you feel about them. You continue to discover something and wonder why other people, especially those in authority, wouldn't listen to them.

I also have a strong sense of justice. I react against what I think is injustice especially against people. But that has to be tempered by looking inside people, seeing what motivates them and not rejecting but trying to understand. I think that's the most important thing in ATD Fourth World, that we try to understand the person who is in front of us. By doing that we understand ourselves and change. I can't see doing anything else that's so worthwhile.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT POVERTY AND POVERTY ERADICATION?

V: That it takes a lot of people to eradicate poverty. That's the first thing. And we need to raise awareness with people, that people who are "poor" have something to give, that they are very interesting people. I think that's the best thing we could do. The only way to achieve that is to bring people together; that's the only way people can discover and understand each other, and maybe grow a little bit of motive for change.

M: I agree with that 100%. I would add that the reason why poverty exists in our world is multi-faceted, that there's not a one-sided solution to any of it. It takes a lot of people and we need to address poverty in different ways from different angles. There's an economic side, education, exclusion, humiliation, social acceptance people, and more. We need to be able to look at these things together. It takes a huge amount of awareness and time, as Vincent said. It takes time to understand real issues around poverty which are intertwined in many different areas.

IS THERE SOMETHING YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

M: When I think about my role as a Volunteer Corp member and of speaking to people who are supporting ATD Fourth World, in a lot of ways I am in a privileged position to carry out the actions many people believe in. I am very appreciative of what it has done to my life personally and to be able to witness changes. My experiences, the encounters between people and the changes that come about clearly aren't possible without the backing of so many. I have such a strong appreciation for the ways that so many people find to support what we are doing.

A lot of it is financial support and a lot is also through volunteering, spreading the word, giving out newsletters that they received years ago, or being out of touch for years then calling us to ask about somebody they haven't heard from in a while. These are many ways that are so important for ATD Fourth World to be able to continue. As a Volunteer Corp member, I feel very privileged to be a part of that and appreciate people for making that possible.

V: I would like to share the idea that we need to challenge young people today. I think ATD Fourth World can be the space for them to bring new ideas and dream, but it is up to us to make that place. How can we go back to the beginning, where ATD attracted young people who felt that this was the place to be, this was where the future can be? That's our biggest challenge now.