



Emma Speaks - ATD Fourth World

When I was first exposed to 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 ATD Fourth World through my children's involvement in the Street Library. It was a time when most households didn't have any computer access. ATD Fourth World came around with computers, and the kids were attracted and they would do the Street Library.

ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corp members 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.



Alvenia, one of Emma's daughters, later joined the ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corp. She is now a community activist working on her own non-profit organization.

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I observed my children and my mom more and more happily welcoming this distraction, and it turned into a welcomed attraction. As the Volunteers were 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 ATD Fourth World exposed us to life other than poverty. They accompanied us in school issues with our children, funerals, housing problems, and celebrations of all sorts. ATD Fourth World encouraged us to speak up, and we all did more and more.

The founder, 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 ATD Fourth World, you're sharing, bonding, and 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.

As I moved further from drugs and alcohol, I began to organize annual block parties. Through that, I met local politicians. When you're surrounded by positive 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 who's hidden inside or somebody who needs help, and you wouldn't know until you knock on their door. Sometimes 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 a child is out, a lot of times the parents also get involved to some extent. It gives kids and parents something to look forward to. These are people who otherwise would be left behind. If you don't reach out, nobody will know that you're there. **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 often 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 ATD Fourth World.

"Every step of the way, I felt important, like I matter, like I'm somebody. I felt my integrity."

Emma with other ATD Fourth World members at a national meeting in Tennessee, 2015.



Today, I'm on the US Board of Directors of ATD Fourth World. I was also a part of the discernment group to choose the new International Leadership Team for ATD Fourth World, where I learned stronger leadership skills and enhanced my communication skills. 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 like I was sharing something that was important, not only to me but to ATD Fourth World as a whole, to people as a whole. That's why I so wanted to be included when I was asked. 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 that I'm included in this fight in a different way now, but an important way.

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Join Emma and other ATD Fourth World members in the fight to overcome poverty by making a donation today.