



# ATD

## FOURTH WORLD

### SPRING 2017 NEWSLETTER

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# Spring News 2017

## *The Right to Inhabit the Earth*

Joseph Wresinski, the founder of ATD Fourth World, was outraged by the fact that people living in poverty are, as he said, “deprived of the right to inhabit the earth.” In the United States many people experience this as the insecurity of safe, reliable, and long term housing for themselves and their families. They are homeless or live in fear of becoming homeless.

In this newsletter four ATD Fourth World members help us look at the issues of sustainable housing from their personal work and living experiences. Through them we see not only the importance of affordable housing opportunities but also consistency in program implementation and long term planning that protect communities and families from gentrification and unbearable rent increases. Are policy makers listening?



### ***Simon Sandvik, ATD Fourth World Member***

My first career experience with housing issues was in Massachusetts with Action for Boston Community Development Inc. (ABCD), a leading human services provider in the Boston region. Within ABCD I worked with a time-limited ARRA (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) workforce development program. ARRA, a federal response to the 2008 economic crisis, assisted government entities and non-profits across the country. After a year, I transitioned into the Housing and Homelessness Department working with programs designed to prevent homelessness and provide affordable housing resources. I managed a scattered site shelter for homeless families. The variety of programs came with a substantial number of funding revenues. Every revenue stream seemed to have a different objective and a different dollar amount. With the exception of the scattered site shelter funded by the state, the majority of funding resources for all housing programs came from the City of Boston, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and federally funded initiatives, completed by private or foundation funding.

#### **Finding and Assuring Resources**

Housing and homelessness prevention programs traditionally are run by local non-profits. The struggle many non-profits face is how to efficiently cobble together resources and keep programs running. Co-workers around in the 1960's and 70's recall a less strenuous experience securing funds from one year to the next, fairly confident that if one government entity would not renew a financial commitment another would step up. It appeared that luxury went away in the 1990's and certainly was non-existent in the early 2000's. ARRA, my first experience with a government funded program had big expectations. Many of ARRA's successes have been measured across the country, but what can't be measured also tells a compelling story. What can't be measured and the stories not being told are those where the funding no longer exists. Is it fair to measure success or even failure if we are not there beyond the duration of funding?

Transitioning to housing and homelessness prevention programs proved another and even greater challenge of balancing resources. The work was rewarding when an eviction was prevented, affordable housing obtained or a tenant made knowledgeable of his/ her rights. The work was also daunting or often seemed unstable when...*(Continued on the next page)*



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...staff positions were eliminated or programs scaled back due to funding cuts or even threat of a cut. When this occurs the credibility of the program and often the agency is scrutinized by the community, including but not limited to private foundations, the advocate community and certainly, and most importantly, the individuals and families in need of the service.

### **Changes and the consequences**

As budgets shrink it's not necessarily the level of funding that can cause a community the most harm, but rather the level of inconsistency in support and the resulting lack of regularity in the objective. All too often the objectives of agencies are driven by the funders, be it government or private. And often, usually every four years for government funds, those objectives change. Along with the change come new leaders with new ideas of solving old problems. It may be because the new leaders have great ideas or it may be a political will, but inevitably they will change the direction of programs funded under their authority. It is this shift, which always affects the people being served and the agencies serving them, which should be evaluated before any action is taken.

It's my personal opinion that everyone wants to eliminate homelessness, ensure all children have a good education and a safe place to grow up. Achieving these goals can take many different paths and we don't always see eye to eye on them. Working in an environment where change occurs at the swipe of a pen, it's important for me to focus on our end goal. It's important to remind myself of our objective and not get lost or frustrated in the minutiae of a new or less desirable course of action.

## ***Members of ATD Fourth World in New York respond here to questions from Katelyn Cheon, ATD's communications coordinator, about their housing experiences and concerns.***



### ***Zena Grimes, ATD Fourth World Activist***

You know young people want to work. But when mine did, the Housing Authority looked at all our income and raised my rent up. And when my kids paid the differences of the rent, they dropped my food stamps down and my cash went down to under \$100. How was I supposed to get around with this amount of money? I hate asking my working kids for money. **As a mother you take care of your kids**, from newborns all the way up to when they have a roof over their head, clothes in their bags, and food on their table. They are working and being independent; they have to buy things for themselves. I hate asking them to buy certain things, either hygiene stuff for myself or for the girls (younger siblings). Now they have to take care of me instead of me taking care of them? It comes to my pride when I ask to borrow money from them.

It's not only me; it's a lot of people in the projects. The Housing asked my neighbor to pay almost \$2,000 for rent! I could get a house for the amount of money they charged me! The Housing Authority wants to raise our rent up every single year when we have older working kids. It makes it hard for people who try to pay their rent. I had to fight, running back and forth from here to the public assistance to there, reapplying for SSI. They got me busy just running! *(continued)*

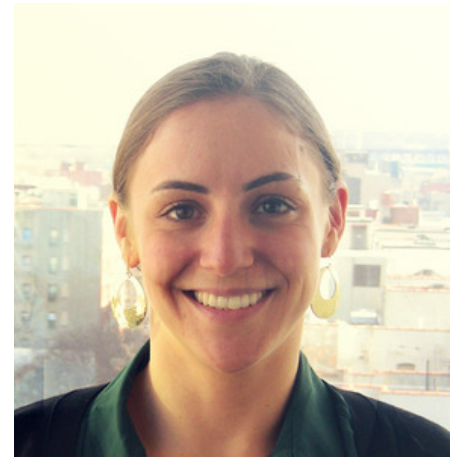


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***They have to give us a chance to live.*** Now that my children are young adults, they have to take care of themselves. They are working to give themselves the benefits of being adults. The rent should be subsidized, a flat rate. It shouldn't be so sky high and outrageous to pay the rent. At the end of the day, we all still have to live! We have to buy food for the family and provide for them. My working kids want to buy a gift for their siblings but they can't even buy for themselves because they have to consider, 'one week I have to give mommy this amount of money' and 'next week I have to give mommy that amount of money.' They are just trying to make up my portion of the rent, and that's not even about providing food and other things.

## ***Julia Sick, Community Organizer, Prospective Social Worker***

Having worked in New York City for almost five years doing community-based work, I have seen how access to housing in this city cuts across all issues and communities. The housing crisis in New York has led to historically high numbers of homeless families and longer and longer stays in shelter. Just recently, the Mayor announced a plan to build 90 new shelters, finally coming to terms with the fact that the shortage of housing in the city is not going away. It feels like 'too little, too late,' but highlights just how severe the problem is.



In my work at the Violence Intervention Program, we work with survivors of domestic violence, many of whom come to us through our emergency shelter. Because of city policy, clients cannot stay in our emergency housing for more than 180 days. With such a severe lack of access to housing, many survivors either face returning to their abuser or going from shelter to shelter, often with small children. Even though there are housing vouchers available, many landlords refuse to take them (which is illegal) and the conditions in apartments are sub-par.

Another issue I've seen is the practice of predatory equity - where a landlord buys a building they can't afford or at a low price and then uses predatory tactics to push out rent stabilized tenants so they rent to new, market-rate tenants. This can mean shutting off the heat, harassing tenants to leave, neglecting the property, etc.

The city needs to create a watchlist of predatory landlords and enforce stricter regulations on practices associated with predatory equity. There needs to be stronger enforcement for landlords to take valid housing vouchers, like LINC, that are provided to eligible tenants. **The city should pass real affordable housing legislation that actually takes into account the communities that have been living in gentrifying communities for decades.**



## ***Evelyn Sanchez, President of Ocean Hill Tenants Council***

My experiences with Ocean Hill public housing have been positive. Compared to other projects, Ocean Hill is smaller, so we don't have many issues that the larger projects have. We have seen many improvements over the past few years and have been a welcoming community. *(continued)*



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But now the problem is: we've been told for so many years that new people are coming in to buy us out. And we see a lot of people coming and looking at us. We're in an excellent location, the schools are getting better, and the park behind us is getting fixed. I've noticed new condominiums. The rent is going up. A lot of us will not be able to afford the rent. So what will happen to us? I'm trying to tell our tenants "let's prepare ourselves for it," but it's difficult. When our day comes, I think it will come with no warning. The projects need to wake up.

A friend who has been through this before told me that, they give you a sum of money for your apartment saying they are renovating. Now some people will take it and move out of New York City to a place that's much cheaper. That money might be good for them. Some tenants may stay in a hotel temporarily. But, if you have a problem of not regularly paying your rent on time, if you're behind, you're not coming back. A new owner will not want that person back in the building. That's when they stop paying for the tenant's hotel room and the person becomes homeless.

They might change the whole rule and we might not qualify with the kind of rental assistance we receive. Eventually it won't only be for low-income, but for whoever can afford to pay. If these new people start buying the housing projects, are they going to have the same kind of services like free heating and electricity? Will we be able to live in the same apartment? We don't know. It's scary when that time comes to Ocean Hill.

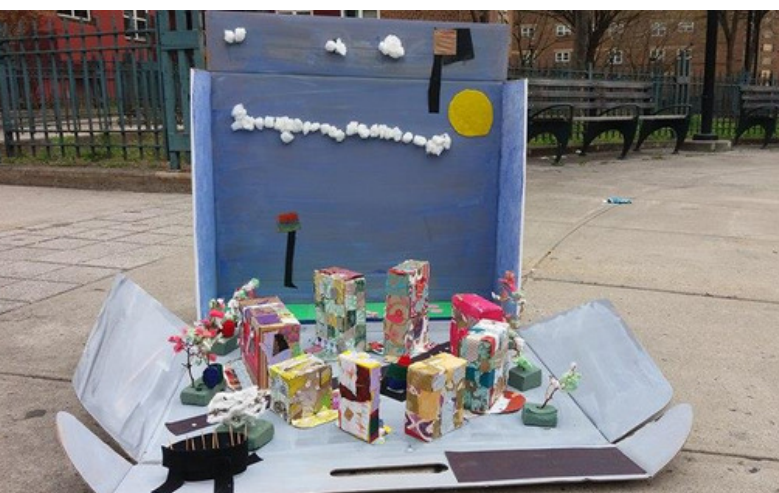
## ***Children at Story Garden in Brownsville made a diorama of their ideal neighborhood and talked about their hopes.***



The Story Garden in Brownsville, Brooklyn, had a theme of housing in April. Children and Story Garden facilitators created a diorama reproducing their neighborhood. Using small cardboard boxes as buildings, children embellished them with colorful and glittery papers to make imaginary creations that represent the hundreds of dull brown buildings forming the landscape of Brownsville.

When crafting them, one child explained how her ideal house would be a comfortable and clean one. The idea of cleanliness often came up in the conversations, as reflected in the welcome sign "Brooklyn good city - keep the city clean" written by 6 year-old Kayla. Five year-old Eva said, "In my ideal city, there would be people and flowers. And garbage cans, so that people can throw their trashes on the way." So a black garbage can was added in the bottom left corner of the diorama.

After installing the buildings in a heart shape, roads, trees, and flowers were brought into the picture. Some children were eager to add the United States flag, a big sun, and the signs announcing Brownsville. In spite of the obstacles, children were proud to be from this neighborhood and hope to improve the living conditions of their families and friends.





## Economic & Community Evolutions in Southwest Virginia – Twenty Years of ATD Fourth World Movement Presence

In 1964, when then President Johnson launched the War on Poverty, he chose a small coal mining community in eastern Kentucky to make the announcement. The poverty in Appalachia was a principal objective of that campaign which brought many anti-poverty projects to the region. In 1966, Joseph Wresinski, the founder of ATD Fourth World, traveled to the U.S to understand this anti-poverty campaign on a large scale. In Appalachia, he was struck by the natural beauty but also by the isolation and poverty. He felt that ATD Fourth World should have a presence there.

The contact with the region continued through correspondence with groups there and visits by ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corp members (Volunteers). In 1994, people from southwest Virginia attended the ATD Family Congress in New York. One delegate was Sr. Bernie Kenny, a nurse practitioner who dispensed free medical help from a mobile RV. She later invited ATD Fourth World to send Volunteers to the region and helped get a small house they could live and work from. When ATD Volunteers Fanchette and Vincent Fanelli arrived in the Virginia coal-field community in Dickenson County, VA in 1995, most of the initial anti-poverty programs had gone, but a handful of the pioneer activists still remained with projects such as Sr. Bernie's Health Wagon and the local Binns-Counts Community Center.

Dickenson County had a “shell building” constructed in hopes of attracting small technology companies. The county, heavily reliant on coal mining, faced the “boom and bust” cycle of the coal industry. This small rural community, isolated in the mountains of southwest Virginia, was at the mercy of the national and global economic downswings. With the recession of 2008 more than half of the coal miners in the region lost their jobs in a two year period.

From the start, Fanchette and Vincent allied themselves as much as possible with the hopes and the initiatives of local groups, especially the Binns-Counts center. Vincent began free computer classes there for adults and Fanchette helped with on-going activities. Both got to know more isolated families, visited them and kept in contact throughout the years. Through this presence and the contacts made by Sr. Bernie, Volunteers came to know the community residents and understand their needs. Vincent provided technical assistance to introduce computers in the record keeping at the Health Wagon and Fanchette did registration at their health fairs. In supporting these community efforts, they tried to make sure that the more marginalized residents were included in the programs.

For 21 years ATD Fourth World Volunteers have chronicled the projects they ran and what they have seen happen in the community. The computer classes Vincent taught graduated over 500 adults but the hope that technology companies move there never materialized. A program to bring internet access ended after 2 years when federal seed money stopped and the private provider pulled out. The Coalfields Expressway announced in the 1990's with the aim of attracting industry remains a paper project. The most damaging setback was in the coal mining industry. Throughout the country power plants switched from burning coal to cleaner, cheaper, and plentiful natural gas. Local coal mines closed with the resultant unemployment. A dwindling population has forced schools to close and consolidate the remaining middle and high schools. Even with school consolidation, budget problems have led to the elimination of some vocational programs and art and music courses.

On the positive side, the goal to extend running water to all Dickenson County residents has succeeded. A third call center continues to operate after opening six years ago. Two previous ones ended up closing. The county is recognizing its other natural resource, the beauty of its mountains. County officials are promoting tourism by developing hiking, biking, and riding trails. They were banking on technology before, now they hope that tourism will be an answer to economic development. But could technology still be a viable option for this county?

In August 2015, the ATD Fourth World team opened a solar-robotics workshop to introduce young people to this technology with an informal and hands-on approach. The priority is to involve young people who have dropped out of school or who have no steady employment. The team advertises the workshop and trainings locally but the response has been very limited. People in the area see the value in the project but factors like transportation, lack of resources, and lack of confidence in one's ability, point to the need of more direct contact and a support group to increase outreach.

The ATD Fourth World solar-robotics project faces the same challenge that the other initiatives faced. It needs to be linked to a comprehensive approach that takes account of other efforts, creating a global approach to community development. It is this new kind of War on Poverty that this southwest Virginia county and many other communities in the country need. Otherwise, the risk is continued pockets of hard-core rural poverty that betray the dream of America.