



Story Garden as Springboard in New York City and New Mexico 2023

ATD Fourth World Mission

ATD Fourth World's mission is building transformative relationships with people in poverty. We are a movement of solidarity and action that centers people who experience marginalization and isolation due to extreme poverty. People in poverty have unique knowledge and experiences. Their participation is fundamental in any effort to create a world without poverty, where each person is vital to building a community. We invite people from all backgrounds to think and act together, respecting the dignity of everyone.

As the United States branch of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, we work in partnership with communities primarily in and around **Gallup, New Mexico** and **New York City**. A more than 30 year history in Southwest Virginia, New Orleans, Washington, DC, and Boston has created a membership base that supports local initiatives and feeds national efforts towards our common mission.

Our teams have spent years, sometimes decades, fostering relationships with families and individuals with a lived experience of poverty. The people we serve are unique to each region. For example, in New York City we've spent more than 40 years building relationships with families living in public housing developments and the homeless shelter system. In New Mexico, members from the local Navajo and Zuni communities have largely shaped the programming and goals that are unique to the vast rural reality. However, the common goal is working in partnership with those who have a lived experience of poverty and marginalization.

STORY GARDEN

In 2023, ATD Fourth World continued its Story Garden programs in New York City and rural New Mexico, serving children in two of the most disadvantaged areas in the United States.

While Story Garden is valuable as a stand alone program, it is also the point of entry to other ATD Fourth World initiatives that have broad impact on families and communities in deep poverty.

Below are highlights illustrating the impact of Story Garden.

New York City

In New York City, ATD Fourth World works in a Brownsville, Brooklyn neighborhood where many public housing high rises are squeezed into a few square blocks. There, families fear going outside due to gangs and other criminal activity. The streets are empty and there is little for children to do. In this neighborhood deprived of resources and full of apprehension, kids stay inside, often with only screens for entertainment.

In an outdoor area at the center of these highrises, the Story Garden program sets up art and education projects. In the summer we conduct a Festival of Arts and Learning. When we arrive for Story Garden - about once a week depending on the season - children are thrilled. "I think they could paint forever!" beamed one ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps member who conducts Story Garden.



Brownsville, New York City

It wasn't always easy. When we started Story Garden in Brownsville in 2016, families were hesitant to take part. Who were these outsiders and what did they want? Did they have a religious agenda? Was there a cost? Was ATD Fourth World one of those groups that sets up for a year, then leaves because "those people are impossible to work with?" Was it safe for kids even to be outside in Story Garden?

Little by little parents begin to trust the program and develop ties with Volunteer Corps members, ties that are crucial in a number of ways.



A young woman from Argentina talks about her beekeeping cooperative, sharing her love of bees with Story Garden. The children made their own paintings with "bees."

Impact

Our investment of time and patience in the Brownsville Story Garden has started to pay off in **positive impacts beyond art and learning for children.**



Story Garden in Brownsville

For example, ATD Fourth World helped connect families to the local public library about seven blocks away. Despite the library's outreach efforts, families living in the Brownsville high rises did not visit or check out books. Recognizing ATD Fourth World's positive rapport with families in Story Garden, **the library asked us for help reaching residents.**

So we invited the library's mobile book unit to set up near Story Garden and our Summer Festival. As a result, families later visited the library to take out books. This example illustrates how **the relationships that ATD Fourth World patiently develops lead to concrete changes in the lives of families in deep poverty.**



Story Garden's Summer Festival of Arts and Learning, 2023

Similarly, trusting connections built through Story Garden in New York have led to young people from Brownsville finding **work and training through our partner project, [WALTER](#)** (Working and Learning Together Electronics Recycling) located near the Story Garden site. It was through Story Garden activities that we met young men such as Abdul and Tiller (profiled [here](#)) who are now employed at WALTER, an electronics recycling business that provides both dignified work and social support (video [here](#)).



WALTER staff in the business's Brownsville warehouse, near Story Garden

Story Garden is the place where adults come to trust us enough to get involved in ATD Fourth World's other activities. Parents we met at Story Garden develop confidence and skills through participation in other ATD Fourth World leadership and advocacy work.

For example, Rosetta Savana met ATD Fourth World through Story Garden in 2016 and then attended our [People's University](#) meetings. Later, she spoke with social work students through ATD Fourth World's [training program](#), helping them understand the experiences, needs, and perspective of people in poverty. In early 2023, Ms. Savana was a member of the leadership team guiding our New York Team's [Evaluation and Planning Process](#).

Reflecting on her **new advocacy and leadership skills**, Ms. Savana said,

“The skills I learned are to be in front of an audience and feel confident in what I have to say and mean it, to facilitate groups, to break down and analyze things, deeper and more meaningful... I never did a facilitation of anything in my life... and it was just curiosity from the moment of planning to the moment of execution. [...]

It felt as if it just changed me. *It was a long, lengthy process. It was one of those processes that you felt as though the outcome was something that you could reach.*

*Being a leader with you all, that was new to me. I liked that you had confidence in me to do something as big as what I did. What I gained from it was that every idea is a good idea as long as you have someone to work it out with. **It was the confidence to say what I have to say, and to lead something great.**”*

Finally, Story Garden is where we met long-term **Fourth World** activists like [Stacey White](#) who has spoken at the **United Nations** about her own experience of poverty. And it was in a New Orleans Story Garden that we met [Stacey Smith Bell](#), who became a member of our **Board of Directors**.

Ms. Bell Smith describes her involvement with ATD Fourth World:

*“We did Street Library [now called Story Garden], then we did a nursery thing, with young kids, for people who were going to work, for their kids who needed help after school, getting on computers and stuff. Then we went to Washington DC, for the annual meeting, and **I became a speaker**... I spoke at a lot of things. I spoke at a college on [October 17th \[International Day for the Eradication of Poverty\]](#).*

I was invited to Paris. My dream... I met the mayor of Paris... I said to her, “Hi, my name is Stacey and I’m in the book, [Not Meant To Live This](#) about poverty.” It seems to be in the Fourth World Movement I’m a speaker...

I’m on the Board of Directors. I love being on the board because I get to hear different people’s thoughts about stuff... I love the way people talk. It’s fun.

When people from Haiti came to New Orleans, they came to my house... I became a speaker again then. We talked about poverty. The earthquake. Their experience was similar to ours after hurricane Katrina.”

Story Garden is the springboard that leads to so many positive changes!



2023 summer festival: Story Garden brings art and enchantment to Brownsville, New York City

GALLUP, NEW MEXICO

In 2022 and 2023, ATD Fourth world has greatly expanded our work in New Mexico. **It all starts with Story Garden.**

In New Mexico we serve rural, low-income families facing challenges in multiple spheres such as housing, food security, education, and employment. Approximately 80% of these families are Native American and our staff and facilitation team include Navajo, Apache, Latino as well as Anglo community members.

As in New York City, our approach is participatory: Programs' design and direction are shaped through dialogue with community members with a lived experience of poverty. **We learn from them, build on their hopes and strengths, and judge the success of our projects through their perspective.**

In the Story Garden program, family members are invited to interact with their children or explore our books and art activities. They are invited to rest, visit with family and friends, contribute ideas for Story Garden, and share their stories. Adults and Elders in the community who come to the market without children are also welcome at, and enrich, Story Garden.

Story Garden in Gallup Flea Market and Gamarco Community

Eleven years ago in Gallup, ATD Fourth World New Mexico initiated the Story Garden program in a local flea market. Since then, thousands of children, adults, vendors and visitors have participated in or supported Story Garden, shaping and enriching it through their involvement. For example, on average per week we welcome about 20 adults and 40 children. In a typical year we have welcomed at least 850 families.

In 2013, ATD Fourth World started another Story Garden in the Gamarco community, a former coal mining town of about 2,000 people five miles outside Gallup.



Residents of a Gamarco trailer park were proud to have their first neighborhood celebration in June 2022

For the 10th anniversary of Story Garden in Gallup flea market, we collaborated on a meaningful video (found [here](#)). The video describes the joy and peace that Story Garden brings to children, as well as **the community-wide impact of our activities.**

This [newsletter](#) featured the impact Story Garden has on adult education students, many struggling with disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of these students were Elders.

*“The Elder students directed the construction of a shade structure at the Story Garden, teaching several young classmates carpentry and the Navajo (Diné) language along with team work and traditional wisdom. ...The Elders mentored the youth and the youth mentored the children. And **for the first time, many of our students realized their own value and worth and abilities.** They felt pride and satisfaction and accomplishment. One of the Elders said, ‘I never knew I had so much to give.’”*

These Story Garden activities counter the isolation and shame that those in poverty feel at not being recognized as people with skills, experience, and knowledge to bring to others. Time and again, **families tell us that fear and shame are as powerful obstacles to overcoming poverty as lack of housing or food security.**



Story Garden in Gallup Flea Market, New Mexico

Story Garden on Wheels

In recent years, through Story Garden connections, ATD Fourth World learned that there are significant challenges for families in rural and Indigenous communities further away from Gallup and Gamerco. Few have educational or recreational opportunities outside of schools, and there is minimal access to transportation. **Without access to the internet or even electricity, many families have no way to provide their children with educational or cultural activities.**

In 2022 and 2023, generous donations and grants helped us realize our dream of a Story Garden on Wheels. ATD Fourth World acquired a cargo van equipped with tablets, books, educational games, a sink station, and a variety of art materials. A sunshade covers the outdoor space, creating comfort in the high desert sun and wind. In very cold weather, the interior provides a colorful and cozy space for activities.



Story Garden on Wheels

Designed to be a mobile educational and artistic program, this van has helped tremendously with ATD Fourth World's overall work to **break the isolation of low-income families in Northwest New Mexico**. Starting in early summer of 2022, two facilitators traveled with the custom-designed van throughout Navajo Nation and other rural communities in Northwest New Mexico.

Story Garden on Wheels is a highly adaptable program that can be set up almost anywhere, whether it be spaces where the community already gathers or right in front of a family's home. **No matter where we go, children and parents are always delighted to see us.**



Remote, yet beautiful, the area is challenging to navigate in the winter.

When facilitators arrive, they set up tables outdoors with activities that support the learning and creativity of children and adults. We always bring books and often read with children. Art activities engage young people and adults alike, providing many learning opportunities as well. One particularly popular activity has been watercolor painting. Through painting, the children not only develop artistic skills, but grow in self-expression. They also share stories of their lives:

One 13 year old painted the journey she makes when traveling by foot over the high desert to her aunt's home, and illustrated the Navajo tradition of using corn pollen to bless and protect the home during one's absence. (- a Story Garden facilitator)

Story Garden on Wheels is building a regular schedule, visiting specific locations and families on pre-arranged days all year round, with more frequent presence during summer and other school breaks.

For the furthest sites, Story Garden on Wheels sets up less frequent visits. In Tuba City, Arizona, in the western part of Navajo Nation and on the outskirts of Hopi Land, Story Garden on Wheels makes the 360 miles round trip journey once every month, on market day. There, we meet families who make a living by selling things like traditional Navajo medicinal herbs or Hopi artwork.

Closer to home, Story Garden on Wheels sets up at the homes of specific families in Thoreau and Gallup, NM during periods of vulnerability for the family.



Story Garden on Wheels customized van

Impact

For people living in an area where educational and cultural resources are almost non-existent, change does not happen overnight. However, in the year that Story Garden on Wheels has been up and running, we've seen the powerful possibilities of this new venture. Even a short visit brings not only joy and excitement but a sense of connection to the outside world. More importantly, it brings hope to families that their children can succeed in school.

Hope is often a vastly under-estimated resource in the struggle to overcome extreme poverty.

It is almost a cliché that nothing can happen without hope. However, hope doesn't just turn on like a lightbulb with a little positive thinking. Families with whom ATD Fourth World works have experienced little but "failure" in the eyes of the world. When they look around their homes and communities, they rarely see reasons for hope. Often their actions reflect a deep state of despair.

And yet ATD Fourth World knows from decades of experience with people in extreme poverty that **hope lies just below the surface**, despite everything. **It doesn't take much to ignite this hope, which then becomes a dynamic engine for change.**

ATD Fourth World has never been an organization that fixes problems *for* people. What we do is simply show children that they can learn. What we do is help parents believe in their kids despite discouraging reports from school. This almost always happens when we show up with Story Garden on Wheels.

Change will not take place overnight, but it will never happen if families remain isolated and hopeless. Story Garden on Wheels is a bridge to the outside world, a slender but sturdy bridge to hope.

Last year, we carried out our monthly Story Garden on Wheels session at the Tuba City flea market. A disabled man came to speak with us, eagerly talking about his five-year-old step-daughter. "I'd love to bring her here," he said. As he continued, he explained that he's been without housing for about 10 years. Recently the relative he had been staying with asked him to move on. With his crutches, he planned to start walking and hitchhiking on the long journey east, back into New Mexico. He carried hope about a new life in Albuquerque.

One day, eleven-year-old Breanna came to Story Garden where she painted, read, and built towers. She did everything she could find! At the end of the day, her aunt came to get her and explained that Breanna was headed to a new foster home that afternoon. She, too, was on a new journey.

Story Garden is a place where people share their stories and entrust us with their dreams and hopes. It's a stop on their journey, *but not an isolated encounter; over time, we almost always see people again*. That's what we told Breanna as she left, "We are so lucky we got to spend time with you today, and we will see you again!"

Planning with people

For 11 years now, Story Garden at the Gallup flea market has been our central hub of outreach, relationship-building, and learning from marginalized families while being a welcoming space for all.

Building on connections made through Story Garden, in 2023 we carried out a participatory learning and planning process with a diverse set of partners, allies and program participants. They helped us build a collective vision for the next five years, a vision in which ownership is in the hands of the people who have become our ATD Fourth World community.

We launched *Stronger Together*, an advocacy and support group for people who want their individual experience of poverty to help build collective knowledge and voice towards changes benefitting the whole community. We also launched *ATD Fourth World Community Lunches* where partners, allies, and people with lived experience get to know each other, build capacity, inspire and support each other, and break the isolation many people feel as they carry social change work forward.

Our 2023 planning process noted **how children have grown and thrived, and how the flea market community has taken ownership of our Story Garden space over the years**. The main learning question that we brought to the community was: *What would it take to build Story Garden at the Gallup Flea Market into a broader community asset?*

A vision emerged that integrates economic well-being, as well as skills-sharing and resource-sharing, giving a platform to the voices of children and encouraging their self-expression. As we develop and implement activities that honor the culture, history, and

strength of the diverse peoples of our community, **Story Garden will remain the heart of all we do.**

CONCLUSION

ATD Fourth World USA is very grateful for all the support we receive that make possible our work in both New York City and rural New Mexico. Patient investment in developing ties with families in deep poverty is crucial to success yet often passed over in the rush to show funders “results.” Unfortunately, many nonprofits can not afford to spend the time needed with families in deep poverty. As a result, these families are left behind. We are so grateful for supporters who understand and value our commitment to building the relationships necessary to effectively counter deep poverty by learning from people who experience it on a daily basis.



Story Garden on Wheels in rural New Mexico



Story Garden in Brownsville, New York City



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