

Children Count

Renee Chaco-Aragon



Children from the Tohajiilee (Navajo) Reservation in New Mexico play on a new basketball court. Thanks to the efforts of the One Accord Youth Council, the children in this community now also enjoy a new softball field and volleyball court.

BEFORE YOU READ: Describe a time you have stood up for a child or children in your family or in your community. In what ways do children need adults to stand up for them? In what ways can they stand up for themselves?

Standing up and expressing the need for change can be difficult, especially in a community affected by historical trauma. But, being counted is not impossible. Making a noise, having a strong will, and being covered with prayers are ways to bring change. In the summer of 2019, I finally stood up for myself and my community.

No Playgrounds, No Parks

I was not raised in Tohajiilee, New Mexico, the community I live in now, but my mother was. In 2010, I came here in search of a place to recover from a divorce. I wanted peace. My adjustment to this community was difficult at first, sometimes bringing me to tears, leaving me fearful of the

future, and often lonely. My children and I experienced culture shock. We came from a town that had different things for children to do. However, Tohajiilee had no brightly colored playgrounds, no peaceful picnic areas, and no sidewalks for walking or biking. There was nothing but open prairie. We had to drive over 30 miles to the nearest city to enjoy parks and other recreational activities.

I let them know that I was not going to stop trying. Someone would hear me someday.

I tried to make the best of our new home. Every evening, I would sit outside and watch the sun set over open land. I began to wonder what it would be like to see children playing basketball among the cedar trees. It got harder for me to ignore the children's isolation and watch them wondering around trying to find something to do.

The Children's Wish List

I decided to seek the assistance of our leaders. Together, we could figure out how to provide some type of recreational areas for our children. I spent a year going to chapter meetings, where I listened and offered ideas for our community, but nobody wanted to hear me. I would come home from the meetings and through frustrated tears, I would talk to my children and the neighborhood

children. I let them know that I was not going to stop trying. Someone would hear me someday.

I decided to write down their wish list of things

they wanted in the neighborhood. They did not want much. They wanted a safe place to gather — a playground and a basketball court. I decided I would take this wish list to the next chapter meeting. I went to the meeting and nothing happened. I felt defeated. I did not tell the children anything that night. I prayed and fell asleep.

Forming an Organization to Make Change

The next morning, there was a knock at my door. It was a local pastor. He introduced himself and said, "Something you said yesterday struck me to my core, and I am guilty of not helping to keep this community together." I told him the truth is hard to hear and hard to say, but it brings hope for change if heard by the right people. The time had

come for the children to speak. I gave him my children's wish list.

Since then we have formed One Accord Youth Council and started seeking donations. My children now have a softball field, bleachers, a volleyball court, and half of a basketball court. My children now have the courage to stand up and be counted. My children now have a voice. My children now have a sense of unity. My children now have hope and a sense of ownership in the community they will one day lead.

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Renee Chaco-Aragon is a student at the Tohajiilee FACE program in Tohajiilee, NM. She is working on obtaining a Bachelor's Degree in Behavioral Science. She is a mother, daughter, sister, aunt, and grandmother, and she is a strong Native woman because of all the obstacles she has faced and overcome, not by her strength but by God's. She also contributed to the "Indigenous Peoples" issue of The Change Agent.



What Can You Do?

What was the problem Renee faced, and what did she do about it?

Do some research online and see if you can find 1) a community organization that focuses on developing local resources, like parks for children, and 2) a local government official who could play a role in supporting the development of parks.

If you are interested in improving options for children in your community, write an email to the organization and/or the government official. Or call or visit them. Report back what you learn.

Read the articles on pp. 33 and 38 to see what other parents have done to advocate for their children.

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Use your online subscription to The Change Agent to access a PDF of the "Indigenous Peoples" issue, published in March 2019. When did Native Americans in the U.S. get the right to vote? See our History of Voting Rights activity and an article by Sheila Mailman on p. 37 of Issue 26, "Democracy in Action."