

Kristen Wenz's Speech

[0:00-0:41]

So, when I was 14, my family was in the process of adopting my little brothers from Ethiopia. And one day my mom asked, "What day should we put for their birthday?" "Uh, the day they were born, obviously?" Ridiculous question. And then my mom said, "Well, Kristen, neither of your little brothers have a birth certificate, so how do you suggest we find out when that was?" Mind blown. Now, 20 years later, I'm still working on it, except instead of trying to solve the mystery of my brothers' missing birth certificates, I try to solve this problem globally.

[0:49-2:35]

So in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for the first time, set a shared vision of basic human rights and dignities that apply to all people in all nations: Article 6, the right to be recognized as a person before the law. Or, a legal identity. For children, this is a birth certificate. And despite this being a universal human right, one billion people today have no record they exist, making it one of the greatest human rights violations of our time, yet nobody seems to know about it.

In the face of world poverty and hunger, making sure everyone in the world has a legal identity doesn't really seem important, but in reality it is.

See, early in my career, I was working with a social worker in a slum community in Mumbai, and we were following up on a case with this little girl who had contracted polio as a baby and was paralyzed from the waist down. When we arrived at the home, we found her on the floor. Her legs were badly scarred and infected, she was malnourished, she had never gone to school and she had spent most of her life confined to this small, dark room.

When we left, I asked the social worker what the case plan was, and she said, "Well first, we have to get her a birth certificate." I was a little taken aback. I said, "Well, don't you think we need to get her some social assistance and a safe place to live and into a school?" She goes, "Exactly, which is why we need to get her a birth certificate."

[2:41-2:50]

People without a legal identity are both uncounted and unprotected. They're among the poorest members of society from the most marginalized communities.

[4:50-5:15]

In 2015, world leaders came together and promised that they would uphold human rights of all people and leave no one behind in efforts to end poverty, hunger and reduce inequalities. But how are they going to uphold human rights and how do they know if anyone is being left behind if they do not know who they are or where they are in the first place?

[7:04-8:05]

So what can you do? See, I believe we are all united by our humanity. We live on the same earth. We breathe the same air. And while none of us chose to be born or the situation we were born into, we do get to choose how we live. Change occurs when a moment of awareness or a moment of compassion inspires a person to act. And through our collective action, we become the most powerful agents of change. And when the cost of inaction is innocent children are left unprotected, unvaccinated, unable to go to school, growing up to be adults who are unable to find decent work or vote, trapped in a cycle of poverty, exclusion and invisibility, it comes down to us to take this issue out of the darkness and into the light. Because it's not every day you get the opportunity to change the world, but today, you do. Thanks.