



Akilah and Carlos's Big Day of Discovery!



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People and families have been arriving in Narneen for what seems like forever. Everyone is different, with different habits, ways of talking and dressing. They have many stories about how they came to be here – some lost their homes during wars, others lost their land and crops to drought and some came to Narneen in search of a better life.

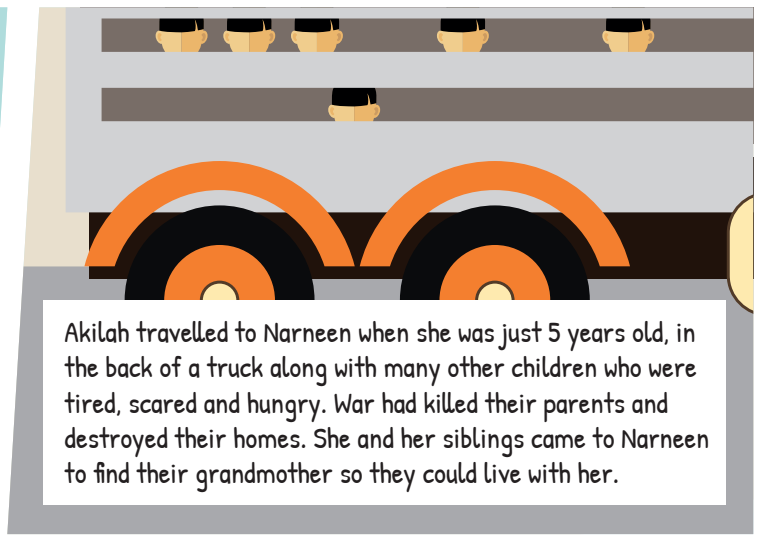
This is the story of two of Narneen's adolescents, Akilah and Carlos, who embarked on an adventure and discovered the importance of the role that all children and adolescents can play in their communities.

AA-HA!

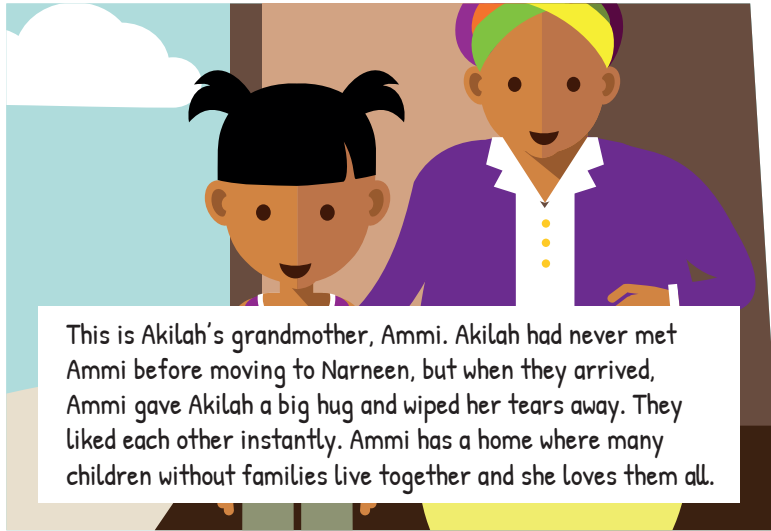
Stands for Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents. It also means "Ah, now I understand!". Every adolescent is unique, with different needs and concerns. AA-HA! are suggestions to governments to help them to make sure YOU understand your health-related rights, and that you are helped to have the best possible chance to survive, thrive, and be in a position to help to transform the society you live in.



Akilah is a 14-year-old girl and the eldest sibling in a family of five brothers and sisters.



Akilah travelled to Narneen when she was just 5 years old, in the back of a truck along with many other children who were tired, scared and hungry. War had killed their parents and destroyed their homes. She and her siblings came to Narneen to find their grandmother so they could live with her.



This is Akilah's grandmother, Ammi. Akilah had never met Ammi before moving to Narneen, but when they arrived, Ammi gave Akilah a big hug and wiped her tears away. They liked each other instantly. Ammi has a home where many children without families live together and she loves them all.

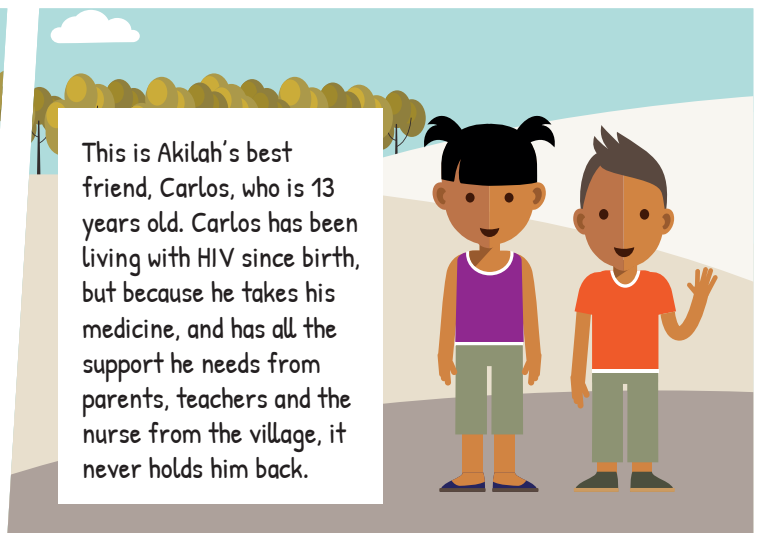


These are Akilah's siblings. Even though you're supposed to love your siblings equally, Akilah likes Marisa the best. Marisa is in a wheelchair and cannot use her legs.



Akilah and Marisa share all their secrets and Akilah tells Marisa about what is going on in the community, since the village does not always have ramps and spaces for Marisa's wheelchair and she often has to stay at home.

Marisa therefore can't make the long journey through the forest to school by herself, so Ammi teaches her at home.



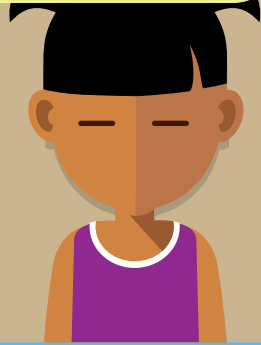
This is Akilah's best friend, Carlos, who is 13 years old. Carlos has been living with HIV since birth, but because he takes his medicine, and has all the support he needs from parents, teachers and the nurse from the village, it never holds him back.



This is Miss P, the imaginary best friend of Akilah and Carlos. She's always swooping in to offer advice and support when they need it the most.

Who is an adolescent?
"An adolescent is someone between the age of 10 and 19 years, between being a child and becoming an adult. During these years, lots of changes take place in our bodies and our minds. We grow and learn to manage our emotions and friendships, and acquire important knowledge and develop skills."

"Wake up! Breakfast is ready! You want time to play before school, don't you?"



As the oldest sibling, Akilah has to make sure everyday all the children have brushed their teeth, eaten breakfast and are ready for school.



"Ammi, why must I eat this? Can't I have just bread?"



"Akilah, eating a combination of different foods is important at any age, but it is especially important for children your age. Eating the right kinds of food keeps you healthy and strong. Because you are still growing, your body needs a variety of food to give it energy."



"Don't make a face at your food Akilah. If you want to stay healthy and not fall sick and miss school, it's important to eat nutritious food."



Akilah liked school, and she was lucky to be able to go to school. Marisa was not so lucky. She couldn't go to school because it didn't have special ramps for wheelchairs, and wasn't designed to cater for children with physical disabilities.



AA-HA!

What is AA-HA!?

AA-HA! is a guidance developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other UN partners to improve the health of adolescents. The WHO is an institution made up by governments to discuss the health of the world, and is part of the United Nations, where 194 countries work together to maintain international peace and security. AA-HA! gives governments advice on actions to make sure adolescents have the right to be healthy, to education, to decide who they want to be and to live a life without violence and fear. AA-HA! believes adolescents have an important role in their communities and society.

Three reasons why communities benefit when we care for our adolescents...

- The adolescents are more likely to grow up healthy and happy and to be able to take care of themselves better.
- Later on, when and if they choose to become parents, they can teach their children how to stay healthy.
- This helps to support and build strong communities that are able to fight poverty and inequality.

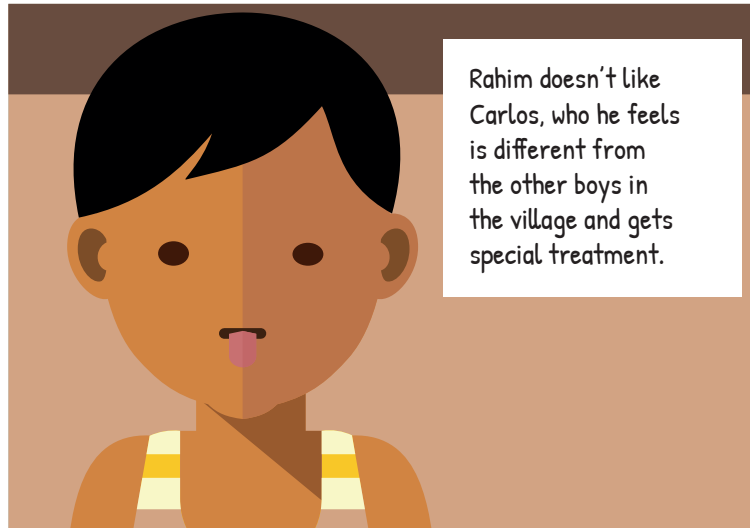


"I'm going to meet Carlos, Ammi, and then we will go to school. See you in the evening!"



"Oooo, the little sickly boy who can't play!"

"Don't call him that Rahim! He's not sick, and he can play. He just has to be careful about taking his medicine. And he can run faster than you!"



Rahim doesn't like Carlos, who he feels is different from the other boys in the village and gets special treatment.



Akilah always meets Carlos before school. They love climbing trees in the forest at the outskirts of Narneen, which is on their way to school.



"Ha, ha you can't beat me Akilah! I'm faster than you!"



"Carlos, I'll race you! Some people think that you can catch HIV simply from spending time with someone who has it. I know that's not true - I'm more worried about losing to you, or falling!"



"That's right! I feel very lucky to have you Akilah and Miss P as friends."



"I wish Rahim didn't make fun of you."



"It is not just Rahim. Sometimes people make fun of me and I can see some children are scared of me."

His family had moved to Narneen because in their earlier village, people would make fun of him and not let him play with other children or go to school. Carlos had no friends there.

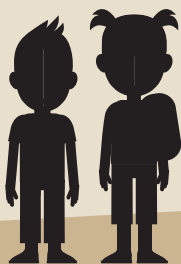


"Sometimes the fear and myths that are often related to living with HIV can be worse than the virus itself, so it's important that we treat Carlos as we would anyone else and make sure our friends do too."

Akilah agreed. She and Carlos kept running between the trees, trying to catch each other.



Akilah! Carlos! Wait!
You're going the wrong way!"



AA-HA!

- HIV cannot be transmitted between people by touching, hugging or kissing. The most common way of transmission is by having unprotected sex. You cannot tell if someone is HIV-positive on the basis of their appearance.
- With the right treatment and care, HIV can be managed and you can live a long and healthy life.
- Adolescents who live with HIV need proper care; without it, HIV can lead to AIDS, which can make you very ill and can even result in death.
- You should ask your doctor about the need to get tested for HIV.

HIV is the human immunodeficiency virus, which attacks the cells of your body that are in charge of protecting you from falling sick. If you don't identify it and treat it in time, HIV can lead to AIDS, a state where your immune system (that keeps you healthy) gets very weak and you can then get a number of infections, cancers and other diseases.

An hour later in the forest, it was clear that Carlos and Akilah were lost.

"...Carlos, we should hurry. They will be expecting us at school and Ammi will worry about us..."

"Where are we Akilah? It is so green here! This is nowhere close to our school. I think we took a wrong turn. This is amazing. Breathe in that fresh air! It's so clean, I have never seen water this clean. Fresh water makes me feel so ALIVE!"

"Me too! In Narneen, it is so difficult to carry water from the well to the house every day. Mansoor once drank some water from somewhere else and got very sick. He cried the whole night and had terrible stomach pain."

TRIP!

"ARGGGGHHHH!!!
My knee!"

"Oh dear! Carlos!
Are you ok?"

Carlos is worried. He remembers his mother saying that the dirt in the wound from a deep cut could make infection enter your body. He knows he has to seek help as early as possible.

"I'm fine Akilah, but my head hurts really badly and my ankle hurts badly too!"

Akilah was also worried. They had not reached their school, Carlos was hurt and they were lost and did not know where to go to get help. What would they do now?

"That looks bad Carlos. Do you see the sign up there?"



Sure enough, there was a sign on the path next to the road that said that there is a hole where the drain had broken.

"...You'll notice that sometimes local authorities make rules to stop us from walking in areas that are not safe. Like when there is a hole in the street. It is important to look out for these signs and to follow them. You are lucky this didn't make you fall in the road where you could have been run over by a vehicle or a bicycle."

Luckily, Akilah also spots a sign that says there's a health centre nearby.

"If I get hurt or I don't feel well, I sometimes tell you or Marisa, or sometimes Ammi, when I'm not scared to tell her. Sometimes I just don't feel like telling anyone at all."

"Who do you usually ask for help, Akilah?"

"Why would you be scared to talk to Ammi, Akilah? I thought you were comfortable with her?"

"I am, but sometimes Ammi lectures me a lot, and I'm not in the mood to listen, especially if I'm not feeling well. Sometimes I worry she also has to take care of all of us and I don't want to trouble her. Sometimes it is just easier talking to Miss P or Marisa, or you. What about you?"

"I don't know... Sometimes it's hard for boys to talk about our feelings or our bodies. I feel comfortable talking to you and my mother, but I don't always share my feelings with other boys because they have made fun of me in the past."

As Carlos and Akilah walked on, they saw a group of children playing with a ball in the field that opened into the village.

"Hi! Can you help us?"

"Hey! This is our field. Who are you?"

A tall, big boy came forwards and said, a little rudely.

"We're not here to play in your field. We got lost in the forest and we need some help. My friend got hurt."


"Look at him, he's such a cry baby! You'd never last a day in our group. We fall from these trees all the time and we don't cry."

All the children started laughing,

Akilah got mad, why did the boy have to be such a bully? She stepped forward, ready to fight the boy, but then hesitated. How would fighting help the situation? Carlos felt terrible.


"Come on guys, don't be mean to him. That looks like a deep cut. You should get some help from our village doctor. Come with me."

The boy took Akilah and Carlos away from the field through the village. As they walked, Akilah and Carlos looked at each other, amazed.




"Isn't your home like this too?"


"Wow! Your village is so clean!"




"Not at all. It's dirty and there is lots of garbage everywhere. We don't even get time to play like you guys do, because our school is so far and we also have chores to do once we come home."



"Yes, and my sister Marisa can only get around in a wheelchair and finds it very difficult to get out of the house and go to school. The roads are in a bad condition and the chair can't get into some of the classrooms. But she's really keen to learn so I teach her at home after school."



"Our school has some students who have disabilities. Sometimes people make fun of them, I don't really like that. Some people also don't like that the girls play ball in the field. They tell the girls to stay at home and support us boys in our interests. It's not right - everyone should have the same opportunities."



"That wouldn't happen in Narneen. Girls are encouraged to go out and play. We are allowed to do everything the boys are!"

Akilah couldn't imagine being told she couldn't play.

AA-HA!

All of us have the right to be respected and treated equally, no matter what our gender, age, religion, race or our disability might be.

Having access to clean water and a healthy environment are important for the health of all adolescents. You can play an important role in your community to help keep your environment clean.

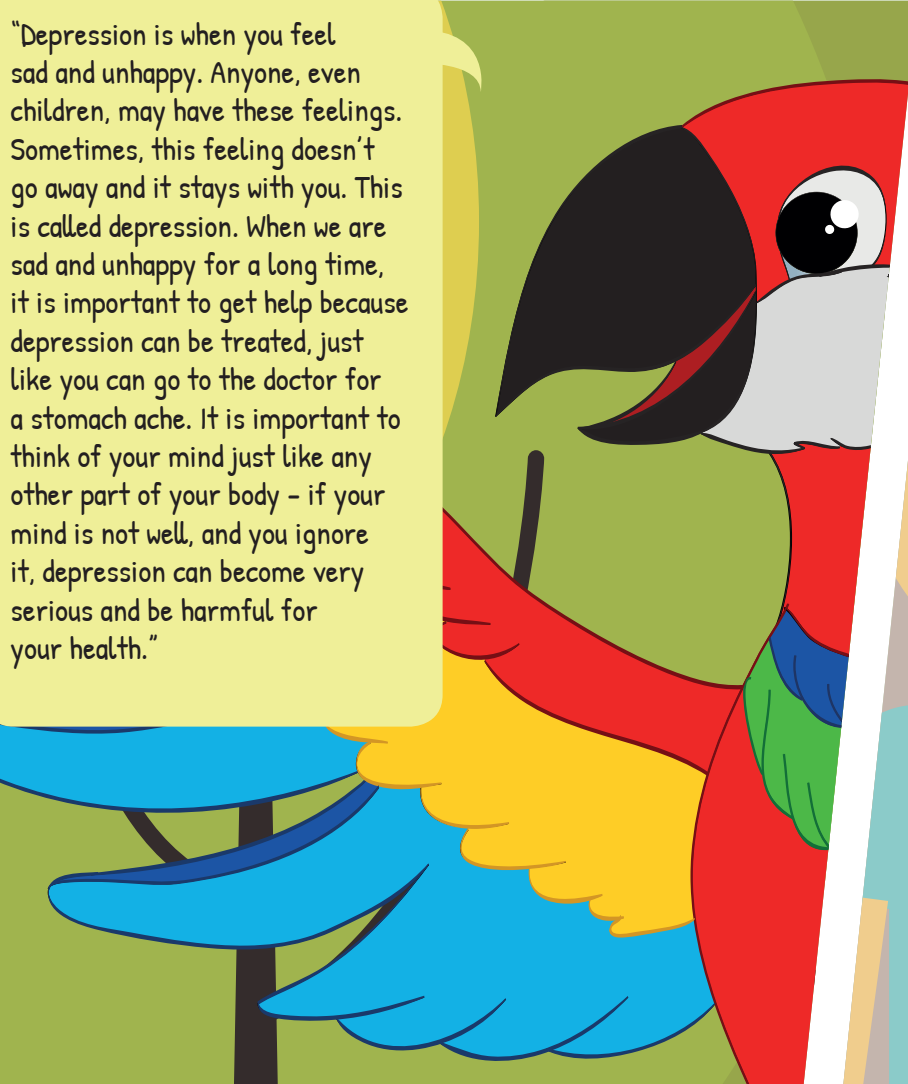
"That's amazing! I would love for you to meet my sister. She's always sad."

"Who does she talk to?"

"I don't think she talks to anyone, she keeps mostly to herself. She's very shy."



"Depression is when you feel sad and unhappy. Anyone, even children, may have these feelings. Sometimes, this feeling doesn't go away and it stays with you. This is called depression. When we are sad and unhappy for a long time, it is important to get help because depression can be treated, just like you can go to the doctor for a stomach ache. It is important to think of your mind just like any other part of your body - if your mind is not well, and you ignore it, depression can become very serious and be harmful for your health."



"You're right. Sometimes I feel very low indeed. Some people tell me that it is okay and it will go away, but it doesn't. I don't always feel like spending time with my friends when I feel like this. But there are doctors and people called counsellors with whom we can talk. You can go visit them after school and can talk to them. They should not share what we tell them with other people."



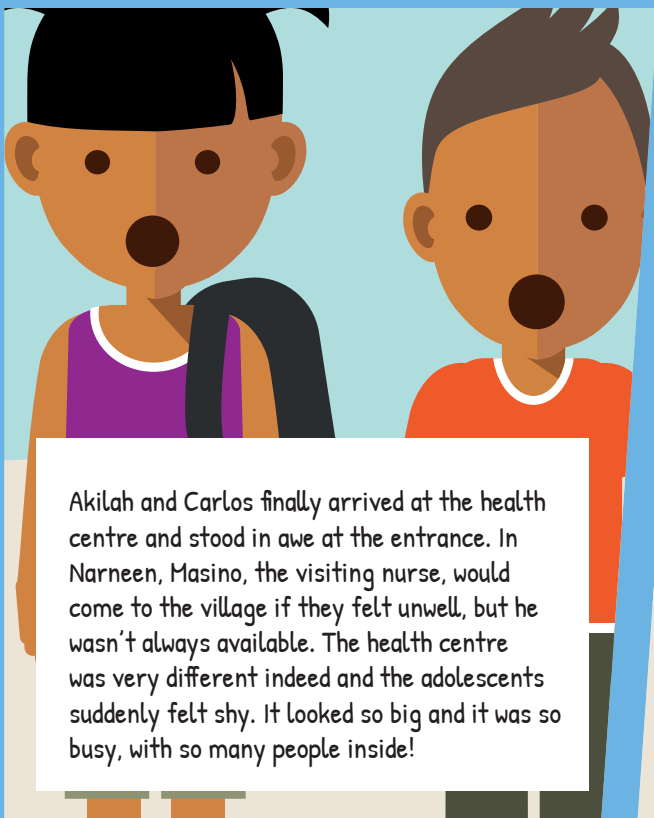
"Thanks, I'll tell my sister about it. Maybe she can visit the health centre too to ask if she can see a counsellor."



The boy thought that this was a great idea.

AA-HA!

- Did you know? Depression and mental health issues are responsible for a big proportion of illness in adolescents globally. Adolescents don't just have problems relating to their bodies, but can also have problems relating to their minds.
- It's important to talk. You might think that you are all alone and that feeling lonely, sad and unhappy for long periods of time is not something that needs attention - but it does, and you can be helped.
- Sometimes people are scared to go to a counsellor or a doctor, because they think people will make fun of them or think they are weak. We are never weak when we ask for help. We are being brave and taking care of ourselves.
- Did you know that depression is one of the top causes of illness in adolescents, and suicide is the leading cause of deaths among 15-19-year-old girls?
- So the next time someone says they are feeling depressed, encourage them to speak up and to find help from a counsellor!



Akilah and Carlos finally arrived at the health centre and stood in awe at the entrance. In Narneen, Masino, the visiting nurse, would come to the village if they felt unwell, but he wasn't always available. The health centre was very different indeed and the adolescents suddenly felt shy. It looked so big and it was so busy, with so many people inside!

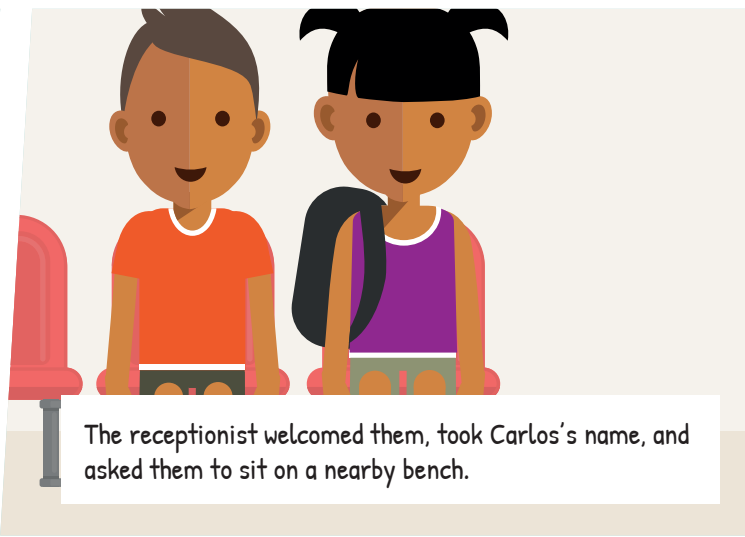


All around there were children playing games, accompanied by adults. Akilah and Carlos were also surprised to see lots of adolescents there by themselves.

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They went to the window to say that they had come to see the doctor about Carlos's knee.



The receptionist welcomed them, took Carlos's name, and asked them to sit on a nearby bench.



One of the other adolescents nearby smiled.

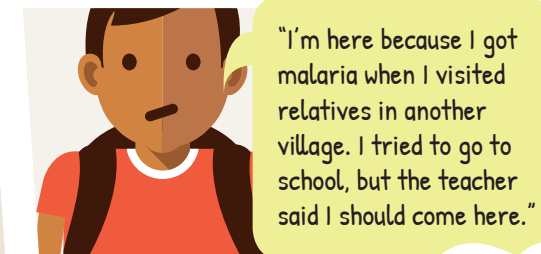
"Hi! I'm George, is this your first time here?"



"I'm Akilah and this is Carlos, he's hurt his knee."



"Your teacher sounds nice."



"I'm here because I got malaria when I visited relatives in another village. I tried to go to school, but the teacher said I should come here."



"Yes, our teacher is lovely and we like him. Sometimes, when students fight with each other or hurt themselves, we go to him for help. He doesn't shout at us or lecture us. We go to him with our problems and he doesn't share our secrets with others. He's nice."

AA-HA!

- Health care often does not reach all adolescents in every community or society. All adolescents have the right to services and information regarding their health and should be able to ask for this right from their governments and their communities.
- Health facilities should be welcoming to adolescents, and staff should be there to help anyone and everyone. They should not judge whether someone's behaviour is good or bad.
- All adolescents should have someone they can trust in their schools whom they can talk to if they have a problem - like a teacher, a counsellor or a nurse, who is friendly to talk to.
- We need to make sure we are reaching those adolescents who need more support than others, for example those who do not go to school because family circumstances need them to work or take care of other children.

Carlos and Akilah see Masino, the nurse from their village, whom they know. Masino took Carlos into a room and explained that he will ask some personal questions.

"Akilah! Carlos!
What are you
doing here?"



"Masino!"



"Why do you need to ask me
personal questions?"

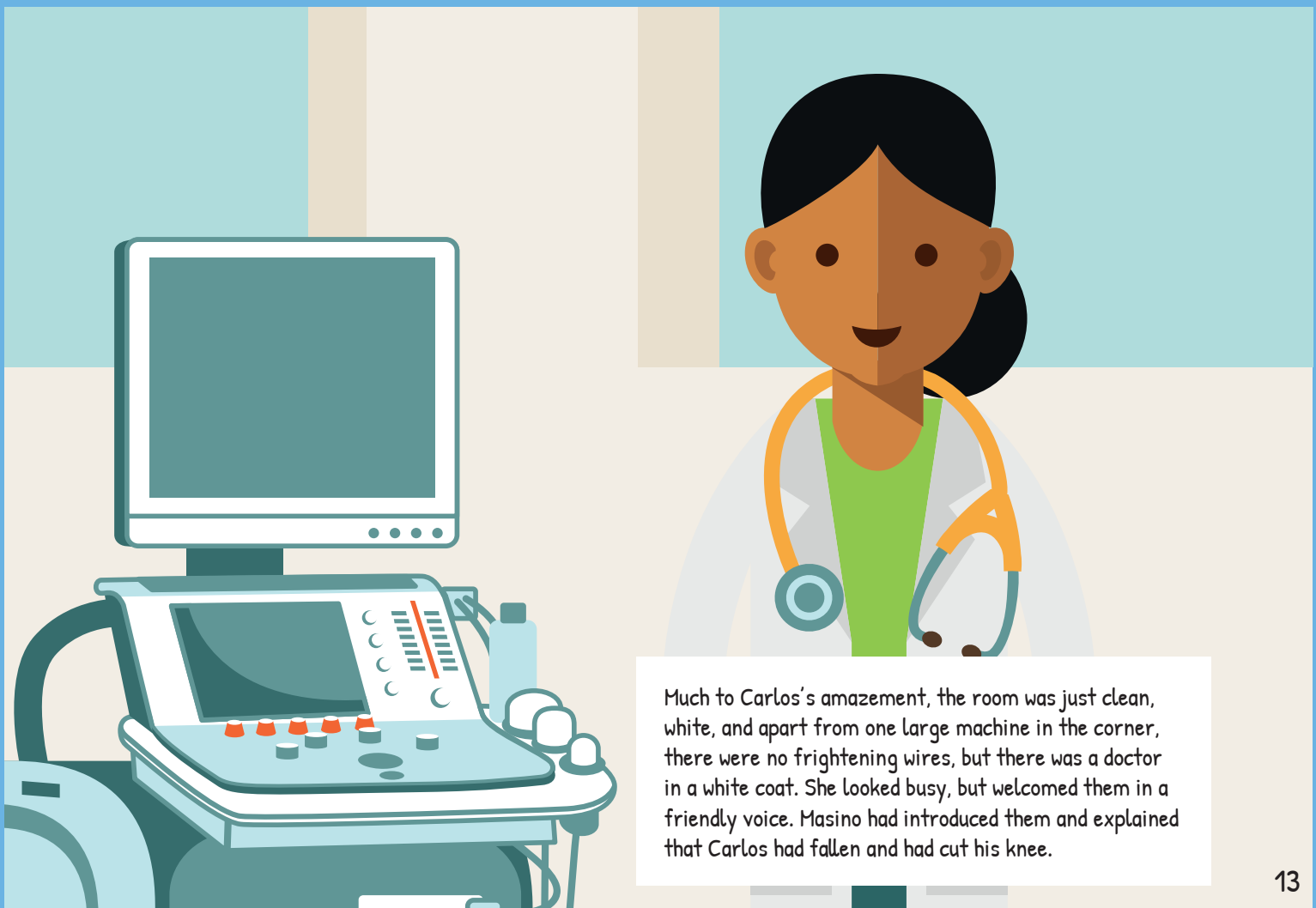


"That's a great question,
Carlos. I will ask because I
want to check that there's
nothing else that we should
help you with in addition to
the cut on your knee. We're
almost done, and the doctor
will see you now."

"Of course. Let's all
go in together and
I'll introduce you to
Doctor Martha."



"Thanks, Masino. I
wish everyone was as
friendly as you. But
I'm still a bit scared.
Can Akilah come
too? I don't want to
go in alone."



Much to Carlos's amazement, the room was just clean, white, and apart from one large machine in the corner, there were no frightening wires, but there was a doctor in a white coat. She looked busy, but welcomed them in a friendly voice. Masino had introduced them and explained that Carlos had fallen and had cut his knee.



"Hello, both of you."

"Well.. I... errr..."

"Well.. I... errr... Hi Doctor, it's just that we are a bit scared of you."

Carlos suddenly felt nervous speaking and looked at Akilah, who spoke up.



"Scared? Of me? Really?"



"Knock knock"

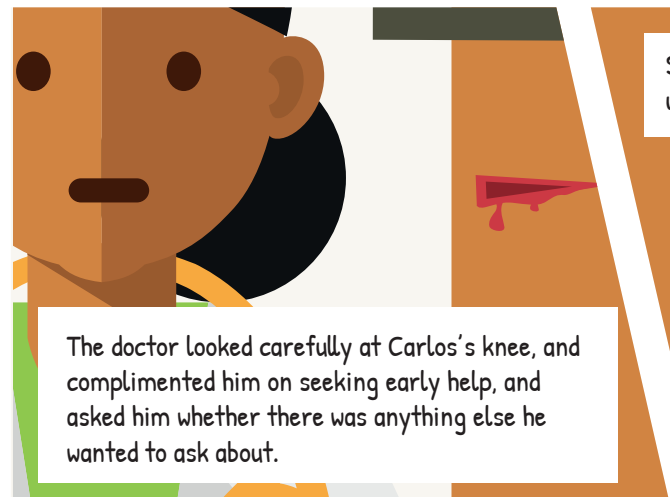
"Who's there?"

"Cow says!"

"Cow says who?"

"Cow says Moo! The Owl says hooo, silly!?"

Suddenly, visiting the doctor didn't seem frightening at all. They all laughed.



The doctor looked carefully at Carlos's knee, and complimented him on seeking early help, and asked him whether there was anything else he wanted to ask about.

She then asked Masino to stitch up the cut and dress it...



...and gave him a tetanus vaccination



"My! That's quite an adventure you've both had! I'm proud of you for coming here. That was a brave thing to do - to ask for help when you needed it."



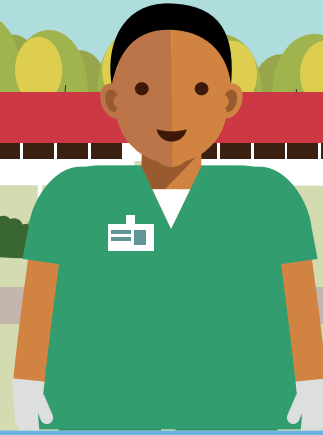
"This place is amazing! We don't have anything like it in our village."

"Well, how about you take a tour of our village with Masino? Carlos, we've called your mother and she will be here in 2 hours - that gives you just enough time to see how different things could be in Narneen."

"Masino, how is this place so clean?"



"That's because this village has a sanitation committee. A few people collect the garbage from our homes every day. The wet garbage is turned into compost, which serves as fertilizer for the crops. We put it on the fields to help them grow better!"

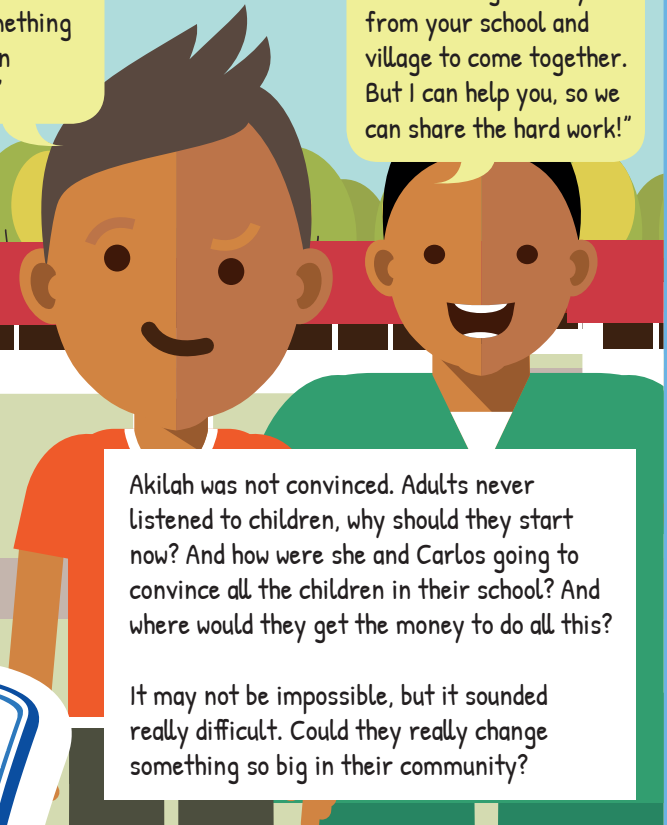


"I also really like the environment here. It feels safer."



"Akilah, we should really think about doing something like this in Narneen."

"This is a great idea! You will have to get everyone from your school and village to come together. But I can help you, so we can share the hard work!"



"Well, when places are clean, they are also more positive and healthy and such places also have less violence."

Akilah was not convinced. Adults never listened to children, why should they start now? And how were she and Carlos going to convince all the children in their school? And where would they get the money to do all this?

It may not be impossible, but it sounded really difficult. Could they really change something so big in their community?

AA-HA!

- Being in a safe place, with clean water and space to explore and exercise, can improve your health.
- Not having these opportunities can lead to poor education, ill health and poor mental health.
- Many people think that adolescents do not have the power to change anything, but that is not true. In many societies, adolescents have just not been given this opportunity, but they should be able to speak their minds and be heard.
- Your voice matters and if you want to change things, there will always be people around you who will want to support you, even if it takes time to find them!
- For example: In 1999, 20,000 young people in six Albanian refugee camps came together and formed Youth Councils. These Youth Councils took action to improve the living conditions in the camps, organized sports and music events, improved safety and cleanliness, distributed landmine awareness information and provided psychosocial counselling for younger children. It's incredible how powerful adolescents can be when they support one another!

Just then, they bumped into someone.

"I want to introduce you to Ms Mayrah. She's in charge of the village and its development."

"Hello Masino! And who have you got with you today?"

"This is Akilah and Carlos. They have a few questions for you!"

"Ms Mayrah, we are so impressed with what we've seen today. How do all the children who live here know so much about their community?"

"Well, many different groups came together in the community and worked with children - like the government, the local school here, the health centre, even some groups from outside the village - a university, a company and a community organization. Have you heard of the United Nations?"

Neither Carlos nor Akilah had heard of the United Nations, but they were too much in awe to say so.


"The United Nations or the UN also has experts who help make sure everyone has the support and advice they need. One of the UN's organizations is the World Health Organization and they came up with AA-HA!"

AAA-WHoo?

Carlos was confused.


"AA-HA! It is a set of recommendations made with the support of adolescents and young people like yourselves and has been put together to make sure all countries and their communities can be made aware of the important and special health needs adolescents have, as well as how to address them."

"So you can think of all the issues you want to discuss with your community and use the AA-HA guidance to support you to share your thoughts and concerns, especially with government officials."




So the guidance helps us talk about our rights?"

"Yes. For everyone to know about and accept these rights is the first step to improving your lives in Narneen. Only if people believe all adolescents should have these rights, can you then demand that they make the changes to bring them into place!"



"Hello, I'm Carlos's mother. Thank you so much for looking after these two! Thank goodness you're both OK. It sounds like you've had quite an adventure today! I've spoken to your teacher at school. Mr Fer was so worried when you did not come to class."

School! Akilah and Carlos had nearly forgotten about school in the day's excitement. They thanked Ms Mayrah and Masino and said goodbye. The whole way home, Akilah's head was spinning with questions.

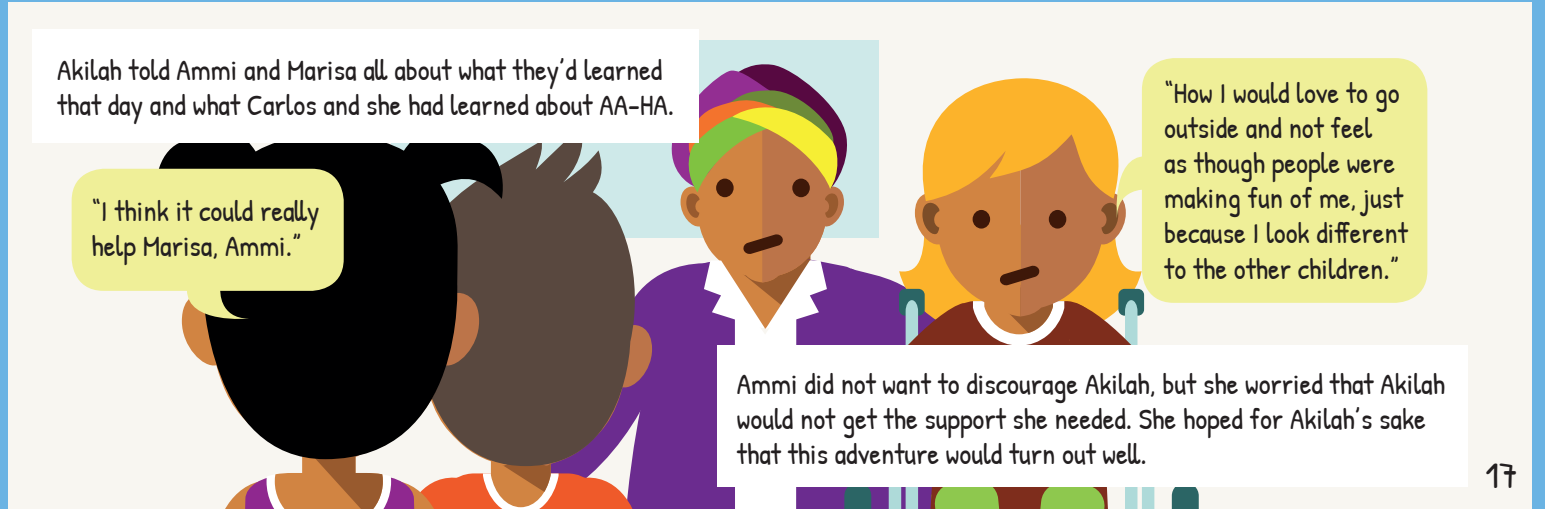


Akilah and Carlos reached Narneen, to Akilah's home and were greeted by a very worried Ammi.

"We are so sorry Ammi! Carlos and I were racing each other and we took a wrong turn... we didn't mean to worry you."

"Akilah! I was so worried! What if something had happened to you?"

"Oh my precious child. We just all love you and want you safe. Now, come and tell us what happened today."



Akilah told Ammi and Marisa all about what they'd learned that day and what Carlos and she had learned about AA-HA.

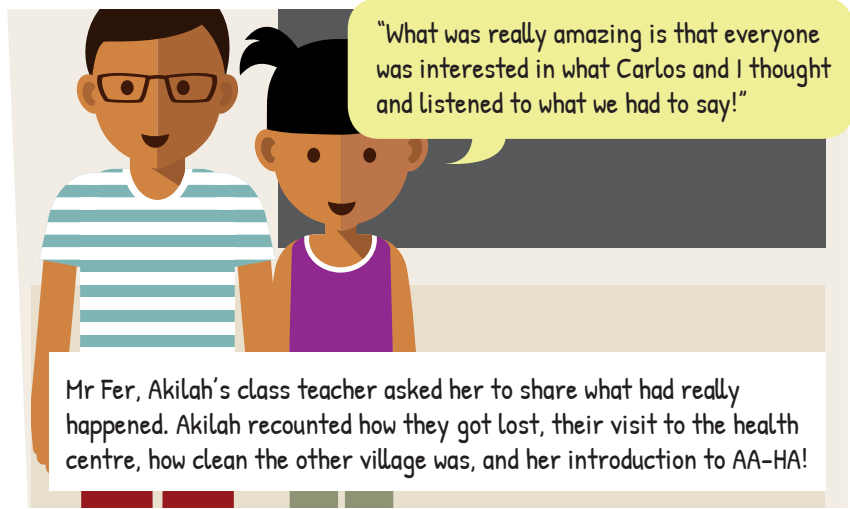
"I think it could really help Marisa, Ammi."

"How I would love to go outside and not feel as though people were making fun of me, just because I look different to the other children."

Ammi did not want to discourage Akilah, but she worried that Akilah would not get the support she needed. She hoped for Akilah's sake that this adventure would turn out well.

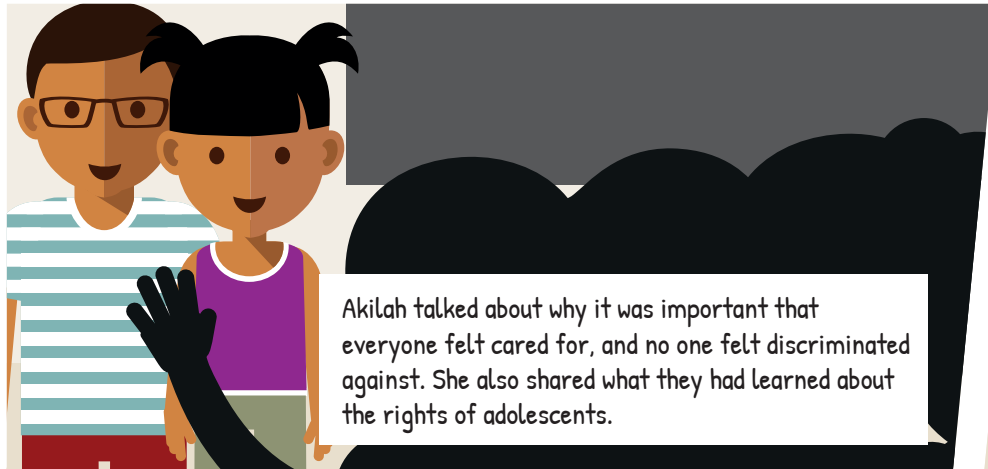


The next day, the story of Akilah and Carlos's great adventure had already spread in school. There was even a rumour that they had fought a tiger!



"What was really amazing is that everyone was interested in what Carlos and I thought and listened to what we had to say!"

Mr Fer, Akilah's class teacher asked her to share what had really happened. Akilah recounted how they got lost, their visit to the health centre, how clean the other village was, and her introduction to AA-HA!



Akilah talked about why it was important that everyone felt cared for, and no one felt discriminated against. She also shared what they had learned about the rights of adolescents.



"Most importantly, I learned how precious we are to our communities."

After Akilah had finished speaking, the classroom came alive as the students talked about how they could all work together to make their community better.

Everyone had lots of ideas. Mr Fer listened, and was amazed.



"Recycling!"

"Better transport for school!"

"This is great - I'm going to give you an assignment. I want each of you to think about the things that would improve this school or the community. Write them down and bring them to my desk."

At the end of class, it seemed that everyone did have a lot on their minds. A list emerged:

- A health centre for our village with friendly workers
- A nurse who visits the school regularly
- Someone we can talk to about our concerns and our health
- Learning more about living with HIV
- No more discrimination because of how I dress, act or express myself
- Let the girls play football and the boys wear pink if they want to – no more name-calling and judgment!
- Clean water to drink
- Toilet facilities at school, so everyone can go to the toilet privately. And girls should have everything they need, so that they don't have to miss class during their menstrual period
- No more garbage in the streets
- I want to feel safe walking near my school and home and to have a safe place to play
- More time with my family and friends, less time feeling lonely
- Information about my health and how to take care of myself, that is easy to understand



Mr Fer was inspired. After all, if Akilah, Carlos and all the class had so many ideas and so much enthusiasm, why couldn't he see what he could do to help turn some of these great ideas into reality?



Several weeks passed.

Akilah and Carlos's great big adventure had been forgotten in Narneen and they had gone back to their daily routine. One evening, when they came back from school, Ammi called them.

"Come here you two, something special is happening!"

Curious, they walked to the community square with Ammi. Wow! The entire village of Narneen gathered in the marketplace. Why was everyone here? And who was talking to them? Carlos and Akilah couldn't see over the crowd, so they wiggled through the crowd to the front, and stopped short, amazed. It was Ms Mayrah, Mr Fer, their school Principal and one more person, who had a badge that looked like he was from the government.

The government official was talking to the crowd.

"And we think if we all work together, we can create a better community for all of our children and young people, and improve the facilities in Narneen! Ms Mayrah has agreed to work with local traffic authorities to make the roads around the school safer, and I will ensure Narneen has a health centre. Mr Fer has agreed to work with families to make the school a safer and happier place for the students. Think of how this will benefit you and how important it is for our children and young people to be able to feel they are supported."

Akilah and Carlos were delighted, it sounded like they were talking about the AA-HA! Perhaps this was their AA-HA! moment for Narneen.

But some people in the community were not so happy to hear this. Someone spoke up.

"We already have enough work and problems that we are struggling with. We don't need new ones! My family does not have enough money to buy our daily food and I have to travel a long way to sell the few crops we produce."

Someone else also spoke up from the crowd.

"I agree. Where will we find the money to do this? And why are you encouraging our children to find more reasons to stay out of the house? Don't you know how unsafe it is?"

Akilah couldn't take it anymore. She HAD to say something!

"Wait! Please!"

Everyone stopped, surprised.

"You need to listen to us, you need to hear what we have to say about the kind of community we want to live in!"

Akilah called all her classmates and together with Carlos, they read out the list they had put together in Mr Fer's class.

Miss P watched as adolescents spoke to their families about how they needed to work together. Even the parents who had spoken earlier, thinking this was a bad idea, felt differently when they heard their own children speak up.

Finally, a quiet voice spoke up, one not usually heard in the community. It was Marisa.

"I love Narneen and this is my home. But I miss being able to do the things that the other young people can do, and I also want to be able to play and go to school. I think we all deserve our rights and should be able to work together to make this possible. I'm ready to help - so should all the adults!"



Listening to Marisa's plea, everyone fell silent. She was right. If children and young people in the community could make such an effort to come together, then the community should support them!



A buzz of conversation started among people. How could they get started? Akilah was overjoyed. This meant Marisa could go to school - they could go together, every single day!



Akilah looked towards her house at Marisa who was waving her hands in the air with Ammi. They saw each other and grinned.

It wasn't perfect, but it was a beginning. And as long as all the young people of Narneen stood together, nothing was impossible to achieve.

Life can never be perfect and there will always be difficulties that we have to face. But if we take care of each other and care about our communities, then we are never truly alone.



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