

Tonga's flamboyant Olympic flag-bearer brings his inspiring message to the UN

He is best known for his bare-chested appearances at the Rio and Pyeongchang Olympic Games, but Pita Taufatofua now wants to use his social media muscle to empower youth, and get them to share their stories.

"The young people are the people who are going to dictate our future," Mr. Taufatofua said in an interview with UN News during his first visit to the United Nations in New York.

The two-time Olympian was one of the main speakers at Tuesday's [United Nations Youth Dialogue](#) event, where the President of the General Assembly and other senior officials joined young people to discuss increasing education and skills training, as well as how to prevent radicalization.

"If we can give them ideas and present knowledge in a way that helps them, as they grow up and work through their careers, then that's going to affect all of us," he said.

The 34-year-old has worked with homeless teenagers on the Pacific island for the past 15 years.

He said that seeing their struggles has taught him the importance of listening and encouraging young people, even helping them achieve small victories, so they feel more confident.

"You can have a young child go through the most horrendous conditions and come out on top," said Mr. Taufatofua.

Empowering youth also comes through education, he said, but stressed that children need to be taught how to think – not what to think: "When they're taught to have a dialogue with each other, different points of view, but still be friends after, that's education."

Interacting with others and remaining focused, is a skill that athletes have to learn, Mr. Taufatofua said, praising the value that sport brings to diplomacy and promoting sustainable development. He pointed to the improved relations between the two Koreas following the Winter Olympics in South Korea earlier this year.

"It allows people to interact in a way that can be sports-like conflict according to a set of rules, so you're in competition, and then you go out and have a coconut together. What other avenues can you compete and then share stories together?"

Born in Australia, but raised in Tonga, Mr. Taufatofua built up his strength lifting heavy cassava and potatoes off the ground, under his father's watchful eye, who wanted him to learn the value of hard work. He went on to

get an engineering degree and is now working towards his Master's degree.

Mr. Taufatofua says his heart is always in Tonga, regardless of where he is. This respect for his country and its people is what pushed him to wear a traditional outfit for the opening ceremonies at the Olympics – despite being repeatedly told he should wear a suit and jacket.

“The message is that you can be you, you can be unique, you can be a representation of your country but still intermingle and be peaceful with other countries,” he said.

“I'm representing thousands of years of voyaging, of being a Polynesian, of going across the sea and not knowing where you'll stop. I feel that everyone who marches out should represent their nation, the future of their nation, the struggles of their nature.”