

# My American Dream

GREAT SUCCESS AGAINST THE ODDS

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, UNITED NATIONS WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

## Ertharin Cousin

**GROWING UP IN CHICAGO'S INNER CITY** during the 1960s,

Ertharin Cousin, 58, learned her community's motto: Even if you don't have much, you share what you have.

She saw it in action while helping out at her grandmother's restaurant after school. "If people didn't have money, she would feed them," she recalls. "There was a sense of responsibility beyond yourself."

### A Great Big World

On Sundays Cousin's father, Julius, a community activist, and mother, Anne, a social worker, piled their four daughters into the car. "They'd drive us to affluent neighborhoods so we could see life outside our community," she says. "So many people grow up with a ceiling because you don't know what you don't know. I knew the world was bigger."

### Focus on Education

High test scores won Cousin a spot in a program that allowed her to be bused to a Catholic school in the suburbs. In high school she was one of the first girls to enroll at Lane Tech, a previously all-male academy. "In many cases in my life I was the first," she says. "Always remember that just because nobody you know has done it before, it doesn't mean you can't be the first to do it."

### Family Support

As a senior in high school Cousin got pregnant with her son

Maurice, who was born a month after graduation in 1975. "My mother said, 'You're not going to stop here. Go to college for one year, and if you still want to get married, you have my blessing. But just go for one year. We'll help you,'" Cousin recalls. With her family's help she went on to earn a law degree from the University of Georgia.

### Making a Difference

Cousin started her career in Chicago politics, later moving to Washington to work in the Clinton Administration. Afterward she took a job as an executive for the supermarket chain Albertsons—"It was the first time I made a lot of money," she says—but quit after five years to help lead the food bank America's Second Harvest (now called Feeding America). She was nominated to her current U.N. post in 2012. "I realized having the ability to change lives was more important," she says. "I believe we can always do better and do more."

—ELAINE ARADILLAS

### 1960 FAMILY VALUE

Cousin (at age 3, right, with sister Tybra, 2) is the oldest of four girls. "I grew up with parents who believed we could do anything—that was their mantra."



### 2008 CHICAGO CONNECTION

Though she's based in Rome, "Chicago is home," says Cousin (with Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama).



### NOVEMBER 2013 HANDS-ON WORK

After a typhoon struck the Philippines, Cousin passed out high-energy biscuits to survivors.



### SEPT. 23, 2015 LEADING THE WAY

With a staff of 13,500 in 80 countries, Cousin heads the largest humanitarian organization in the world. "I believe in the generosity of human nature," she says.



Photograph by NATHAN PERKEL  
HAIR & MAKEUP: RENNO BUKO, FROM TOP, COURTESY  
ERTHARIN COUSIN(2), HUGH ENER/WFP



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