Sunday morning, Labor Day weekend, I was trying to wash a stack of dishes while my two year old and his puppy were on a tear of destruction behind me. We just got over a tantrum when he pulled salsa out of the fridge just to spill it, and fought for at least a half hour when I demanded he was responsible for cleaning it up. With all this other chaos, all I could think of while trying to wash dishes, was the Housing Authority article I read the night before.

I understand, of course, public housing needs to do checks to stay up to codes and standards. Of course it helps ensure health and safety and welfare of all tenants. But I am lucky that no one is coming to do a housekeeping inspection in my home. I am a single mom, with a toddler, working full time to pay my rent, so that's a minimum 50 hours per week not at home. No back up, no relatives anywhere nearby to watch him or take him off my hands so I can clean up, let alone rest.

The part of the article that really got to me was when Kontz mentions "some of our tenants have never been instructed or shown or trained how to keep a house clean." Now for him to show that kind of insight, then say "they need to work on it" is like a brush-off. To me, this is a big deal.

I grew up in an alcoholic home full of shame and neglect. It was never cleaned, and the scum was so thick in the kitchen and bathroom, there was moss growing. I have put a lot of time and energy focusing on how to break a lot of the negative cycles I was used to growing up. I was never taught how to clean a house! It's been hard seeking out healthier people and asking them, "What can I do?" One woman, I cried to on the phone because my newborn was going through bottles faster than I'd clean them, and I'd run out at the most crucial moments. She tried to get me on such a strict regimen, I thought, I'll always be cleaning and ignoring my child - is that better? Or, I'm so exhausted already; I'll never sleep if I only have the time to clean when the baby is napping! o I felt I had to choose: between neglecting my health, never resting, ignoring the short time I had with my child awake, neglecting him for the sake of a clean house - or living in a mess. Honestly, the mess usually won.

It was extremely hard, mentally, physically, and emotionally, but I was determined to develop healthier habits, both for my sake and my son. It is still a daily coin-toss for what the day's priority is after work: bonding time, cleaning, or rest. I am getting a little better at moderating, keeping a balance, and taking the pressure off myself. Pressure just about killed me, and coming this far alone to change and learn new habits has been an uphill endurance battle. Most of the time cleaning is minimal, 'til a full house scrub down over the weekend.

What made me get to my stack of dishes this morning was too many flies coming around. As I cleaned them, I say to myself, at least I am living much cleaner than what I grew up in. My son even sat with me today to help me clean those dishes. But thank God no one came in inspecting my house, especially after the dogs track in mud, or get into the dirty diaper bin!

So I challenge Mr. Kontz, if he cares about families being safe and sanitary, to help educate them. The cycles of dysfunction are very hard to break; almost impossible without outside help. My mother was shamed for her poor housekeeping, and it was embarrassing for me to ask for help, because I had never been taught. et's not shame people into living better.

My standards are much higher than the way I was raised, but I may not pass your inspection. If you want your units kept up to a standard, try holding workshops, or housecleaning classes, with cleaning tips and time-management, or even showing health risks of not cleaning up your home. I'm sure many people could benefit - even beyond public housing tenants, but outside community members, like me! You could even have a kids' activity section, for moms who wouldn't have a babysitter to be able to attend. This is a proactive idea that would build community, open dialogue, and benefit everyone. Instead of a public shaming followed by a "do the right thing" slogan.

If you know there are deeper-rooted reasons to why your tenants' housekeeping can't pass your standards - don't you think that's civic duty to help? "Your definition of clean" is EXACTLY what your tenant asked for. Instead of shaking your finger at her, holding at least a meeting that is interactive, with space for questions, is the least the Housing Authority can do. Let's not just assume we are all on the same page. It is "sad to say," but those who were fortunate to be raised with those basic skills may be surprised how much impact sharing them with others can have. You may even [learn] something from the rest of us, too.

Sincerely,

Katie Schultz
Gallup, New Mexico

Staff Reports
Dear Mr. Kontz,