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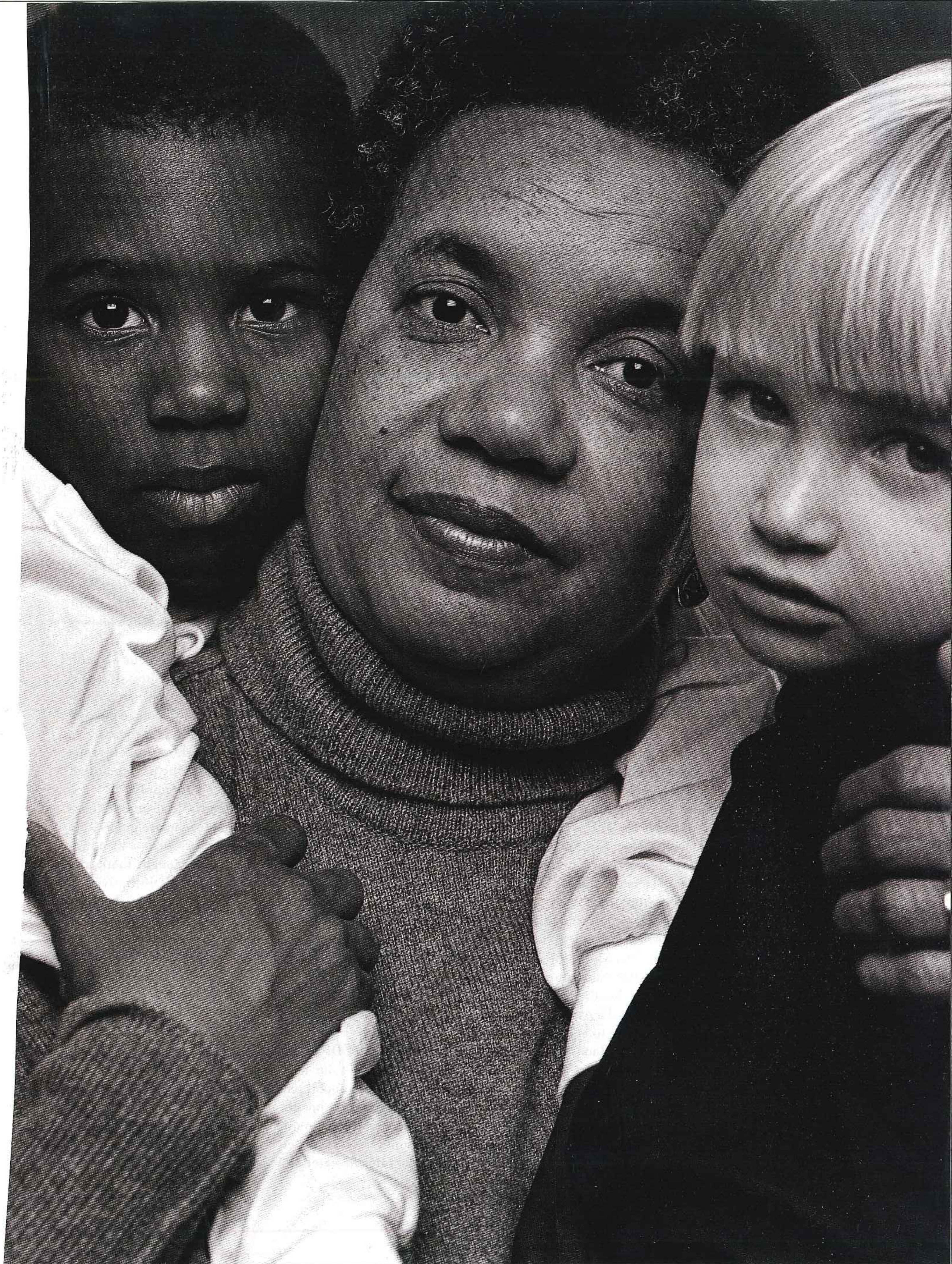
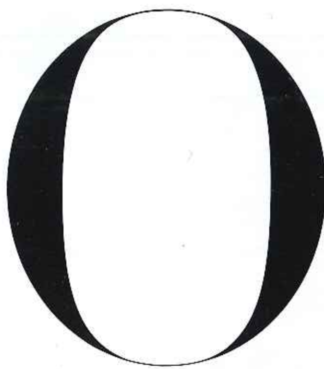
Children's Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman is an unrelenting visionary who has spent her life leading the crusade to help our nation's children. By Clara Bingham





One day in 1969, Marian Wright Edelman returned to Yale Law School. She had graduated six years earlier, worked as a civil rights lawyer, married, started a family, and founded the Washington Research Project, a public-interest organization devoted to expanding the services of Head Start. That day in New Haven, Edelman lectured on the needs of underprivileged children. She spoke gently but forcefully, painting a clear picture of the lives of children born into poverty in America. With a graceful cool, she appeared indignant, but not bitter, as she presented the facts.

Afterward, a young law student approached Edelman, asking for a summer job. Brainy and ambitious, the student was eminently qualified. But Edelman had to tell her that the Washington Research Project could not pay summer interns even the smallest housing stipend. Unfazed, the law student volunteered her services and, after graduating, became a full-time staff attorney and, eventually, chair of the board of directors. Her name was Hillary Rodham.

Two decades later, Hillary Rodham Clinton is moving into the White House, the first First Lady to have dedicated her working life to the cause of poor children. And the small public-interest group that Edelman founded in 1968 has evolved into the Children's Defense Fund, with 120 staff members and an annual budget of almost $9 million. At 53, Edelman is the most respected voice for children in the nation. Not incidentally, she recently wrote a book, *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*, which has sold some quarter of a million copies.

Last November a measure of her success came just days after the Clinton victory. In the new First Lady's first public appearance since the election, Hillary Clinton addressed the Children's Defense Fund's annual fund-raising dinner in Washington. CNN interrupted regular programming to broadcast the speech. Edelman introduced her old friend, and as Clinton came to the podium, the two women paused midstage and hugged. Her eyes welling up, Hillary whispered to Marian, "I love you very much." Then Clinton took the stage and told the nation that Marian Wright Edelman was her friend and mentor, a "leader of so many years." She spoke of the "great mission" that still united their lives.

The youngest daughter of a Baptist minister, Edelman developed a sense of mission while growing up in the small segregated town of Bennettsville, SC, where she was born in 1939. Also the granddaughter, sister, and aunt of Baptist ministers, she spent her childhood deeply involved in community work. "Service was as essential a part of my upbringing as eating and sleeping and going to school," Edelman recalls. While studying at Spelman, a black women's college in Atlanta, she prepared for a career in the foreign service. Then came the civil rights movement, and Edelman joined up. Helping others would be "the very purpose of life" she decided. "Service is the rent we pay for living."

But she soon realized that the law was the tool she most needed. After graduating from Yale Law School in 1963, Edelman spent a year in New York—learning civil rights law at the NAACP. She moved to Jackson, MS, in 1964 to begin her career and became the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi bar and one of only four black attorneys practicing in a state with a black population of 900,000. In a major civil rights battle, she challenged the Mississippi congressional delegation to restore Head Start funding for the state. White lawmakers opposed her, withholding millions of federal dollars from the black community, but Edelman prevailed.

In 1967, when Robert F. Kennedy visited the delta, it was 28-year-old Marian Wright who guided him through shanties overcrowded with dazed, hungry children. On the same trip, she met Kennedy's assistant, Peter Edelman, a former Supreme Court clerk from a conservative Jewish family in Minneapolis. They married the following year and had three sons.

Edelman moved to Washington in 1968 to be with her husband. It was hardly a sacrifice because she felt that she would have more impact from the nation's capital. Single-handedly, she crusaded the cause of children, initially focusing on Head Start, children's health and day care. For the next 20 years, Edelman pushed Congress to pass a national child-care bill. She expanded Head Start and Medicaid coverage for children and helped to combat hunger among the very young in the '70s. In the Reagan '80s, she became a lonely voice for renewed government funding for the poor. "Marian is the best advocate I've ever met," says West Virginia Senator Jay Rockefeller, Edelman's legislative ally. "The Children's Defense Fund has provided all of the intensity and heat behind children's issues."

Edelman *is* intense. She identifies herself so closely with her cause that she speaks in the first person plural. It's as if she wants to remind us that *we*—you, too—have an obligation to the nation's children. Congressmen who have crossed swords with her in legislative battles call her "arrogant," "a bully." But what Edelman really is is fearless. Not everyone can meet her high standards. The selfish, the uncommitted, the cynical, and the self-satisfied need not apply.

Rockefeller concedes that Edelman's high-mindedness "brings out strong feelings from people who are opposed to her." Her archenemy is Phyllis Schlafly, president of the ultraconservative Eagle Forum. Schlafly has fought tooth and nail to undo the Children's Defense Fund's initiatives in Congress, insisting that it aims to take the responsibility of child rearing away from the nuclear family. Schlafly argues that the Children's Defense Fund "wants to make day care a middle-class entitlement run by bureaucrats." She calls the CDF "a radical left-wing lobby." Other conservative Republicans object to the expensive price tags Edelman attaches to her programs.

Of her critics Edelman says, "I am tired of sloganism." She insists that the CDF is, in fact, a conservative organization: "We spend all of our lives trying to figure out how we can strengthen and support parents. Our point is that families are the most important people in children's lives."

While most Washington lobbyists exert their influence with money, Edelman's currency is facts. Facts like these: "Every dollar invested in Head Start saves almost five dol-

lars on the other end in later remedial costs." When President Bush took office in 1989, Head Start funding was about $1.2 billion annually. At $2.8 billion now, the program serves one in three eligible children. In 1993, Edelman is asking for full funding of an expanded, full-day, full-year Head Start that would cost $13 billion a year. "Whatever it costs, it's a bargain," argues Edelman. "Prevention pays, so we are just going to have to make this up-front investment."

Each year, the CDF publishes 2000 pages of research reports, but the secret to the organization's success lies in Edelman's single-mindedness. Known as "the fastest-talking woman in the world," she gives as many as 50 speeches a year. She visits hospitals, witnessing the pain of infants in neonatal units; she testifies at hearings, schemes with community activists, and returns scores of calls every day. Some observers contend that Edelman deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. Robert Coles, author of the *Children of Crisis* series, is one of Edelman's oldest supporters. "I don't think anyone has done as much for America's children as she has in the last 25 years. There's a moral energy she brings to this work that goes back to her childhood. There is always in Marian the minister's daughter from South Carolina," says Coles.

In her slim best-selling volume, *The Measure of Our Success*, Edelman imbues a form made trite by Dale Carnegie and Ann Landers with a high level of sophistication. Part self-help manual, part epistolary advice, part autobiography, Edelman's book offers politically savvy dos and don'ts for ordinary people. The centerpiece, 25 "lessons for life," ranges from the elementary ("Lesson 1: There is no free lunch. Don't feel entitled to anything you don't sweat and struggle for") to the overtly spiritual ("Lesson 25: Always remember that you are never alone").

In the book's foreword, Edelman's second son, Jonah, now a Rhodes scholar, credits the civil rights movement with the happenstance of his birth. He believes that in the absence of the turmoil that brought his black and Jewish parents together, "the person that I have become—the cultural mulatto, the well-to-do Black liberal wary of the political process, the sheltered Bar-Mitzvah boy who has struggled with his blackness—never could have existed. Society, I do not believe, would have allowed someone of such a diverse heritage to develop." His parents' lessons, writes Jonah, gave him the confidence to believe in himself. He adds, "The publication of my mother's book is a project I have both feared and welcomed—feared because everyone will realize the legacy to which I am tied and the standards I feel responsible to uphold; standards by which few except my mother could live."

Edelman draws lessons from reality: Every minute a teenager has a baby; every 32 seconds an infant is born into poverty; every day 135,000 children bring a gun to school; nearly 40,000 babies die each year before reaching their first birthday; America has a higher infant-mortality rate for black infants than 31 other nations, including Cuba, Bulgaria, and Kuwait. "But," she points out, "these are things that the Clintons understand."

Not everyone can meet Edelman's high standards. The selfish, the uncommitted, the cynical, and the self-satisfied need not apply.

For the past 12 years, Edelman has been in the political wilderness. But for the first month of the presidential transition, Edelman's name topped every shortlist for the new President's Cabinet. Nonetheless, official Washington has never tempted her. "I'm really an outsider by instinct," she says. "If you go into government, you have a very different role, and you have to represent and listen to all constituencies. That's a very worthy thing for somebody else, but that is not my mission."

In her new spartan office on Capitol Hill, a group of framed posters faces the desk—Edelman's pantheon of heroes: Einstein; Frederick Douglass; Gandhi; Harriet Tubman; Albert Schweitzer. One senses, though, that Edelman is guided by her own inner compass. "I was put on this earth," she says, "to stay completely focused on children, and I'm going to stay 100 percent focused on children."

A child of the '40s, a woman of the '90s, Edelman is America's universal mother. She lost her own mother when she was 45 and her father when she was just 14. Even now, with a family of her own, she feels bereft. "I still feel both losses deeply. Nobody told me how hard it is not to be somebody's child—to be an orphan—even as an adult."

With Bill and Hillary Clinton in the White House and 28 new congresswomen, Edelman has a wider community of colleagues than ever before. The new female members of the House have pledged to fight for full funding of Head Start and to repass the Family and Medical Leave Act vetoed by Bush. "We have the greatest number of women and minorities [in Congress] in our history," says Edelman. "These are people who understand the day-to-day struggle to meet family needs. A lot of men in power just don't get it, or they don't want to, since they have not had to struggle with young kids and child care. I think the growth of leadership voices by women is going to be a crucial element in moving [children's issues] to a very different level of attention."

Hillary Clinton, member of the CDF board since 1978, has not missed a single meeting. During the 1992 presidential campaign, Clinton found time to fly to Washington the day after the New Hampshire primary. By mid-November, with the grueling election battle fought and won, she again honored her commitment to the mission she and her mentor began together a generation ago. She "walked in here as First Lady," Edelman remembers, "and all of our lives were changed." At the end of the meeting, Edelman escorted Hillary to her car. By then, news of the First Lady's visit had spread through Capitol Hill. A crowd gathered in the street. But that was not all. There were faces, Edelman observed, "faces in all of the windows of the buildings across the street." It seemed as if the world had suddenly taken notice. "That's when I finally began to say, 'My goodness, life has changed.'"

FORMERLY WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT FOR "NEWSWEEK," CLARA BINGHAM IS CURRENTLY AT WORK ON A BOOK ABOUT WOMEN OF CONGRESS.