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Women in History

Marian Wright Edelman: Crusader for Civil and Children's Rights

Shirley J. Mills

"You really can change the world if you care enough."

Marian Wright Edelman

Marian Wright Edelman was born June 6, 1939, at a time when prejudice and segregation were the norm. The Wright family lived in a small, southern town of Bennettsville, South Carolina, where Marian was the youngest of five children. Her father, the Reverend Arthur Jerome Wright, was a Baptist preacher, and her mother, Maggie Leola Bowen Wright, was an activist for the rights of women and African-Americans. Her father expected his children to do two things—work hard at getting an education and serve others through community service. Marian Wright was encouraged by her parents, teachers, and church leaders to live her life with no limits. These key adults kept telling her that she could go anywhere and do anything she wanted regardless of the limits placed upon her by society. These humble beginnings set the stage for a brilliant law career and a career of advocacy for children and marginalized families. With multiple degrees, countless honors, several books, and a long array of national and international experiences to her credit, she is quick to note that her modest beginnings were the foundation of her strength today.

After graduating from Marlboro Training High School, she left Mississippi in the late 1950s to attend Spelman College, a historically black liberal arts college for women in Atlanta, Georgia. There she served as student body president. After graduation in 1960, she realized that a career in law would provide the entry into a life that would enable her to effectively create the changes she believed the country desperately needed. She was accepted into the Yale Law School in 1960. After completing a law degree in 1963, she returned to Mississippi and in 1965 became the first African American woman to pass the Mississippi State Bar Exam and be admitted to the Mississippi Bar.

About the Author

Shirley J. Mills is a research assistant with Nebraska School Based Teacher Led Assessment Reporting System (STARS) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She received her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Higher Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She spent 38 years in K-12 education before returning to the university to complete her doctorate. sjmills4@unlserve.unl.edu.

Marian Wright established the course of her career in Jackson, Mississippi, directing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Educational Office with issues involving racial inequality. In her private practice, she took on civil rights cases. She saw the terrible effects of racial segregation and the healing power of positive action. Her other passion involved improving the lives of children. By experiencing first hand the overwhelming problems of illiteracy, poverty, hunger, lack of health care, and lack of hope, she was stirred to serve her community's poorest children. She assisted with restoring federal Head Start funds, expanded food stamp eligibility, and served as the counsel to the Child Development Group providing health care, food, and education to poor children.

At the urging of Martin Luther King, Jr., and her friend, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Marian Wright moved to Washington to be of greater assistance to poor people everywhere. She helped organized Dr. King's Poor People's March. It was through her urgings that Congress passed new, expanded child and family nutrition programs throughout the country.

It was in Washington that she met Peter Edelman, a Washington, D.C. civil rights lawyer. They married in 1968 and had three children—Joshua, Jonah, and Ezra.

She founded the Washington Research Project in 1964, a public interest law firm. In 1973 she founded and became president of the Children's Defense Fund, one of the nation's premier advocacy groups for young people. Its mission is to leave no child behind and to ensure that every child is given a healthy head start, a fair, safe, and moral start in life with the support of caring families and communities. It receives funding only from foundations, corporate grants and individual donations to support its multi-million dollar annual budget. As its president, Marian Wright Edelman pushes for many reforms that make the lives of children better including disabled access in schools, affordable child care, immunizations, nutritious

food, educational opportunities, and \$48 billion legislation to create the Child Health Fund. As founder and president of the organization, she continues to urge all Americans to demand that Congress make the right choices for the welfare of all children. Through her unfailing energy and determination, Marian Wright Edelman continues to provide children with the essential necessities for success—educational opportunity, equality, justice, and hope.

In 1996, she founded another children's organization, Stand for Children, which brings together children's rights activists from across the United States to improve the lives of children. In addition to her work with children, she served as director of the Center for Law and Education at Harvard University and is the first African American female on the board of Yale University.

Marian Wright Edelman's most influential political tie was during the Clinton Administration. Former First Lady and current New York State Senator, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was once a Children's Defense Fund staff attorney and chairperson. Through this political tie, Edelman was able to advance the cause of children's rights and the plight of African Americans in general.

Marian Wright Edelman has received countless honorary degrees and many awards including the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship Prize; the Albert Schweitzer Humanitarian Prize; the Hinz Award; the Ella J. Baker prize; and in 2000, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award, and the Robert F. Kennedy Lifetime Achievement Award for her writing.

She has written many books and articles including *Lantern: A Memoir of Mentor* (2000), a book about the people (lanterns) who helped shape and influence her life; *Guide My Feet: Prayers and Mediations for Our Children* (2000), a book of prayers and mediations for parents and others who try to instill values of faith, integrity, compassion, and service in children; *The Measures of Our Success: Letter to My Children and Yours* (1993), which was her way of passing on the values of hard work, service, responsibility, and faith that were given to her. Her most recent publications include *The State of American's Children* (2005); *I'm Your Child, God: Prayers for Our Children* (2002); and *I Can Make a Difference: A Treasury to Inspire Our Children* (2005). In addition to the many books she has written, Marian Wright Edelman is a prolific author of articles and speeches that are inspiring and filled with hope.

Marian Wright Edelman continues to fearlessly crusade for the rights of the poor and marginalized children. Her unfailing devotion to this cause has proven over and over that it is possible for one individual to accomplish greatness.

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