

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

At the close of her recent book, Families in Peril, Marian Wright Edelman says, "Every individual has a responsibility to try to make a difference, to give imaginative flesh to the idea of justice." This dictum could be taken as an epigraph on her own life.

Born in Bennettsville, South Carolina, she took a bachelor's degree at Spelman College in 1960 and then a law degree at Yale. After a year as staff attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Legal Defense Fund in New York, she became Director of its Jackson, Mississippi, office, in the process becoming the first black woman to qualify for the Mississippi bar. In 1968 she moved to Washington where, under the auspices of the Southern Center for Public Policy, she began an enterprise originally called the Washington Research Project. This was the germ of what became in 1973 the Children's Defense Fund, of which she has been president since its inception. In each of the five major program areas the Fund concentrates on -- education, health care, child care and development, welfare, and juvenile justice -- it has been a material force for the amelioration of child-related social problems. The effectiveness of her advocacy is such that she has been called the 101st senator on children's issues. Recently she has devoted attention specially to problems of infant mortality and teenage pregnancy.

Her achievement in bringing to light much that is distressing in our country, and in proposing pragmatic and effective steps forward, has been widely recognized; and she herself has been called upon for broad leadership, through bodies as varied as the Yale Corporation and the Council on Foreign Relations. In 1985 she was awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship. It is appropriate that colleges and universities, institutions with special reason to be aware of the urgency of safeguarding our children's futures, have showered Marian Wright Edelman with honors. Today we are proud to join such institutions as Smith, Williams, Swarthmore, Columbia, Amherst, and Yale in conferring on her this degree of Doctor of Laws.