

GDF 25th Anniversary Dinner
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FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

CDF 25TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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This is a copy of of the First Lady's remarks as prepared for delivery.

Thank you. Thank you, Mrs. Daley for that introduction and for all you and the Mayor have done to lift up the children of Chicago. It is great to be home, and especially wonderful to see so many familiar faces and so many new faces -- all of whom are here to honor my friend and mentor, Marian Wright Edelman and 25 years of the Children's Defense Fund.

[This dinner comes, of course, at a time of intense media scrutiny...a time when reporters and talking heads are watching your every move; analyzing everything you say; reporting every rumor; even compromising your privacy. It can be very very tough. But I wanted to set your mind at rest right up front.

Delores assures me that Michael Jordan -- and the Bulls -- are holding up just fine.]

I want to thank everyone who made this evening possible -- and particularly Delores Jordan. I first met Delores almost 10 years ago, when she appeared on a panel in Greenville, North Carolina. She was talking about education and parenting -- and I remember being immediately impressed then, as I am now, by her passionate dedication to all children.

Let me also thank Glenn Close, the sponsors, the underwriters, and the other co-chairs: Mrs. Daley, Marilyn Migdin, and Rick Jasculca, who, incidentally, is much more than a PR whiz. For those of you who don't know about Rick's other life, he has also long been what is called a lead advance man, someone sent all over the world to ensure that even the toughest events and trips come off smoothly for Eugene McCarthy, President Carter and now Bill and I.

You have to understand that the advance mantra still tends to be that you can't trust anyone over 30...not to keel over, that is. I think Rick has earned the distinction of working the most years ever in this capacity, while still standing...still smiling, and, most important still tirelessly serving his community and country. And the President and I want to thank him for his commitment.

When I told people where I was going tonight, a lot of them asked me "Is it a dinner to honor Marian? Or CDF." And I said, "It's the same thing." You can't pay tribute to Marian without celebrating CDF. And you can't celebrate CDF without paying tribute to Marian.

As some of you many know, the first time I heard Marian speak was almost 30 years ago. She came to my law school to talk about children living in poverty. And she did it in typical fashion...with the moral passion of the religious leaders in her family and the cool brilliance of a great lawyer simply laying out the facts.

I knew instantly that I wanted to work for her. And approached her afterwards to ask a direct question: Could I get a summer job? She gave me an equally direct answer: No, because they didn't have any money to pay interns. I found a way to raise the funding and come anyway. Like many others after me, I thought I was just passing through. And, like the rest, it turned out Marian couldn't get rid of me. [I came back as a staff attorney right after law school, and later was proud to serve on the board for many years.]

Now, you always hear about how half of Washington has worked for Marian -- from my former Chief of Staff Maggie Williams, to the Chair of Voice of America, Evelyn Lieberman, to the head of the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Olivia Golden. But if you ask any of them. It doesn't matter who they are or how long they've technically been gone from CDF. They'll tell you the same thing. That they never stopped working for Marian. Because, somehow

during their tenure at CDF, she inspired them to never stop working for children.

As I thought about what I could possibly say to do justice to CDF and Marian on this Silver Anniversary, my mind kept coming back to the words of a theologian who inspired Dr. King. Reinhold Niebuhr once said: "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love."

Marian and CDF have always known that our children must be saved by hope. Faith. Love. Hope that we will eventually create a better world for our children -- despite the setbacks, despite the obstacles -- if we never give up.

Marian often tells the story of the time the great Sojourner Truth was heckled by an old man during a speech she was giving against slavery. He said, "Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Why I don't care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea." "Perhaps not," she replied, "but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching." From its first day, the

Children's Defense Fund has kept biting and fighting to put children on our national agenda...to make sure that people hear the voices of all children, especially those too often ignored, too often forgotten.

I remember back in the early 1970s, when Marian convinced some Senators to sponsor child care legislation. And, even though it created a whole new system of child care...it went through Congress with little notice. That is, until President Nixon returned from China to veto it. In his veto message, I'm told he claimed it would communize and nazify the upbringing of our children...which I think meant he didn't like it. But, Marian and CDF kept at the battle for quality child care for the next 20 years.

They kept at it until the landmark child care legislation was enacted in 1990. They will keep at it until we enact the President's child care initiative...the largest investment in child care in history. And they will keep at it until no family has to make the impossible choice between the job they need and the child they love.

And they will do it driven by faith. Yes, faith in the spiritual sense...you can't talk to Marian for more than 5 minutes without being inspired by her deep

spirituality, nurtured by parents who believed in service to God and humanity...passed on through her dedication to all children, especially her three extraordinary sons. I can't tell you how many late night phone conversations that started about CDF eventually turned into conversations about our own children.

I'm also talking about faith in our ability to change the world -- one child, one family, at a time. Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic once asked a Senator to help a certain struggling family. The Senator sighed and said, "Julia, I've become so busy that I can no longer concern myself with individuals." Julia replied, "I find that quite remarkable. Even God isn't that busy."

CDF has always made it clear that no one is that busy. And I think the power of their approach is best embodied in their list of what happens to children every day in America. They tell us that every day, 14 individual children are killed by firearms, leaving behind devastated friends and family...1,403 babies are born to teen mothers...8,470 children are reported abused and neglected...and it goes on and on...making a case by simply laying out the facts. Saying this is what is actually happening to real children every day. And, taking it even further, by

challenging us as individuals to do something about it -- every day.

Because CDF has done something about it every day, with every weapon they could find-- research, lobbying, t.v. ads, lawsuits -- every victory for children in the last 25 years has carried its signature. Finding out how many children were not in school. Opening classroom doors to disabled children. Expanding Medicaid to cover more children. Increasing funding for Head Start. And, most recently, helping to provide health insurance to millions of children who don't now have it.

All incredible accomplishments. Now, if you ask Marian what CDF victory she's most proud of, she'll always point to the last thing they got done. And ask for -- or actually demand -- your help in tackling the next item on the agenda. Because as Niebuhr made clear, we are ultimately saved by love. It doesn't matter if you're a superstar or a member of a small church in Tennessee...all are the focus of CDF's plea for help.

It may be true that Marian has a slight blind spot for popular culture...from this century. It may be true that her staff and family have been known to nudge her and point out that a major celebrity has just walked by. But, once she knows who they are, she never wastes any time in tracking them down and asking them to donate money or something even more precious: time. Marian has always asked a

lot of everyone...but never more than she asks of herself.

She asks all of us to make a lifelong commitment to children and families in need. With hope, faith and, above all, love. And so the best way we can pay tribute to CDF and her leadership is to always stand in the right place -- together. To always stand up for the right thing...for children. And to always stand strong...so that no child is left behind.

Now, it is my special honor to present Marian with an award from Chicago and all its children. It reads, "Chicago salutes Marian Wright Edelman for 25 years of love, undying support, and advocacy for children's rights. Chicago Silver Anniversary. April 27, 1998." Please join me in congratulating and thanking a friend and teacher, a pioneer and inspiration to us all -- Marian Wright Edelman.