MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN INTERVIEW
*MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA*
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Marian Wright Edelman**
**Activist**
**7/12/2011**
**Interviewed by Julie Cohen**
**Total Running Time: 42 minutes and 52 seconds**

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America

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JULIE COHEN:

Tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what life was like.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:

I grew up in a small southern town, Bennettsville, South Carolina in Marlboro County, a town of about 30,000. My father was a Baptist minister. My mother was the entrepreneur in the family who did all the fundraising for the church, was the church organist, the mothers club founder, Missionary Society head, and it was completely segregated. And all the external messages of the segregated South of the '40s and '50s told me as a Black child that I wasn't worth much,-

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-but I didn't believe it because I was buffered by the messages and rituals and beliefs and values of my family. I had great parents and my community co-parents. My Sunday school teachers were my public school teachers and the community considered children community property. And so it was very clear about what they wanted for us. It was also very clear what they viewed success as being, which was service and a good education and giving back from that good education-

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-and so I've always felt very lucky to have been born who I was, when I was, with the parents I had. And then as I got older with the convergence of great historical events and great mentors, role models, to be in college in the middle of the civil rights movement and to have the Dr. Kings of this world, it's daily presences in my life and then to go to Mississippi and to have those great women in Mississippi be examples. So I've just felt very lucky.

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JULIE COHEN:
You say that you had a sense from society of limitations on you because of your race, how about your gender?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
I did have that expectation from the outside world, but I had an extraordinary family again. My mother and father were a real partnership, and it was all raised clear from the beginning that they thought that their girls—my sister is the oldest, she's twelve years older, we have three brothers in-between and then there was me, six years behind everybody else, an accident—but we always knew that we were as smart as our brothers and the expectations by both parents is that we as, the two girls in the family, would achieve as much of the brothers.

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And so, I now realize how unusual that was but the expectations about education, very clear. The night my father died, his last message to me was, “Don't let anything come between you and your education.” He always made me believe that I could be anything and do anything and that character and hard work and determination were the real measures of life. And I thought everybody had parents like that but I realize again,-

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-how wonderful the high expectations and the supports were in my family and the relationship that they had. And my father died when I was fourteen, my mother didn't miss a beat even though they were real partners, and that was extraordinary.

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JULIE COHEN:
And you say they were emphasizing education. When you started at Spelman, what was the atmosphere like then? Was the sense that most of your classmates, like, we're going to go out and achieve and be professionals? What was the level of expectation?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
They wanted a Morehouse man as a husband. I think I was probably different from many of the young women at Spelman. But I think that the expectations of middle class girls at Spelman, which was a tea party lady school, was that we would get a good education, that we would probably become teachers and that if we were lucky, that we'd nab a Morehouse man and if we were even luckier, we'd nab or marry a doctor. A Howard doctor.

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But it was pretty traditional, and I guess I had always had different aspirations. I had as a little girl hid behind a very high hedge when my father was being asked permission for my older sister to marry. I listen in on this…

The young man who was asking for my sister's hand from my father was saying, whether he would let her get married at twenty-three after she'd been out of college for two, three years.

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She taught for two years at a private girls boarding school, and then had taught for a year at Benedict College. My father was not pleased, and said, "What in the world is she thinking about getting married? You don't need a boy. She shouldn't be getting married right now. She should be going off to graduate school." He eventually gave his permission, but that really did stick in my psychic having listened- I listened here behind the hedge. You're supposed to use the education you got, and there's more to be done than just getting married.

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JULIE COHEN:
In Bennettsville, South Carolina, was the idea of a Yale Law School even on the horizon for most people?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Law school never crossed my mind. I didn't know any women who were lawyers. When I got to be older and at Spelman, Constance Baker Motley kind of crossed my awareness. Yale, I don't think I knew about Yale but I was growing up in a little town in South Carolina, and my father whose guidance I

have followed, tried to follow most of my life, really believed that God ran a full employment economy and if you follow the need,-

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-you would never lack for a purpose in life and that's basically what I've tried to do most of my life. And so I was planning to go into the foreign service at Spelman. I was so lucky, thanks to Howard Zinn, to spend the most glorious fifteen months of my life abroad, to get outside of those gates and all the restrictions and little preacher's daughter, South Carolina town, as well, and find myself in Paris and Geneva-

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-but I also knew that I would never fit back into the South. And happily the civil rights movement and the sit-in movement came about in my senior year in college, and I followed up on that by volunteering in the NAACP and seeing all these people who had never been able to get a lawyer and all the complaints of people who- White lawyers didn't take Black civil rights cases then. And all these poor people who couldn't afford a lawyer and I was just shocked and asked myself, "What in the world are you thinking about, doing to go in foreign service when the real war is at home?"

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And so on a fluke, I got very mad and I said, "I'll go to law school. That's what's needed." And I applied without- I only applied to Yale, but had no idea what law school was like. Howard Zinn probably helped me fill out the application because we were so busy demonstrating in lots of ways. But I went to law school because I wanted to go to Mississippi. I hated every

minute of it, but I went to visit my friends in Mississippi in my first semester in law school.

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And… It became very clear why I was in law school and that I could stick it out for another two and a half years, because there were 900,000 Blacks in that state. In 1961, there were three Black lawyers in Jackson who took civil rights cases and none of them had gone to law school. They were saints. They studied and did the best they could with so little, and that was the first time when I visited Mississippi where Medgar Evers,-

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-who I love now that the airport has got an exhibition for Medgar, but he picked me up and took me home to meet Myrlie and then drove me 90 miles up to Greenville, Mississippi where my friends from SNCC were and the sit-in kids were. And that was the first time they brought out police dogs, the first news at that first visit. The first hour was of a shooting in town and fear was palpable. But the next day as we went down to try to convince people to just try to register to vote,-

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-there were huge crowds and they brought out the police dogs for the first time and all my SNCC friends were arrested, and I could not get into the courthouse to do anything. I had only a few months of law school, but that consolidated my absolute determination that I'd get through the next couple of years and I'd come back to Mississippi to practice law. And so I felt very lucky because Mississippi was the crossroads of change and probably the

most exciting time you could be there and almost everything I do now, The Children Defense Fund, came out of those two eras and the sit-in movement in Atlanta and then, in that Mississippi period. So I just followed the need.

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JULIE COHEN:
Mississippi had to be almost the least hospitable place for you to choose.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
It was horrible. Of course.

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JULIE COHEN:
Give me a little broader sense of how you were thinking at that very young age, like, "This is the choice I'm going to make and here's why."

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Oh, there was no question about going to Mississippi after my first visit and I couldn't get in the courthouse and the police dogs were out there and they were trying my friends without lawyers and without bail. That was it. And I knew that's where I would come, and it was scary but needed and it was

probably one of the most exciting and extraordinary times in my life and for many people. It was a totally closed society.

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It was an iron curtain as much like what I think was faced in the Soviet Union. But when you're 19 or 20 or 21 or 22 or 23, and you're tired of injustice, and I've always hated not being able to go anywhere I wanted to go that anybody else could go, and I can't stand to this day any child being excluded from anything. Mississippi was just the place that was suited for what I wanted to do, and I'm very grateful for those experiences. It was totally lawless.

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But that first experience, that first year in my law school where I felt what it felt like to be totally isolated and totally alone and totally at the mercy of people who hated you. And I don't know how in the world the people who live there day to day, who didn't know how to get to a phone booth and call John Doerr, who didn't have the ability to leave in three days. But I was just… That was home.

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JULIE COHEN:
And tell me a little bit about taking the bar. What happened, how that unfolded for you.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:

Well, I tried very hard that first time not to get arrested because I was told I had a very slim chance of getting into the bar in the first place. If I got arrested, that would be it. So I was trying to be good. Mississippi had automatic admission like if you went to Ole Miss, you were automatically admitted into the bar. And then you had to take a bar exam if you were from these outside places. And I went through fifteen months of fiction that I was the clerk of the three Black lawyers who signed all the papers.

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I did all the work, and we all put up with that fiction. That was fine. I was running a legal factory and managing hundreds of volunteer lawyers. And the first time I walked in the court, it was very funny. I mean, I set up two law offices before the summer project of 1964. One in Memphis to handle the cases anticipated out of northern Mississippi, and then one in Jackson, but I went into Federal Judge Cox's court, who was a very well-known racist judge,-

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-and went into the conference room where all the lawyers were sitting, all White male lawyers. And it was as if a martian had walked in the house. I could not believe the silence that was struck. But I went on the table and I tried to shake hands with everyone. None of them would shake my hand, but that was all right. I didn't know whether they were so stunned into silence, it was 'cause I was a woman or whether it was Black or the combination which they'd never seen before. I think Connie Motley had been through there and

tried the Meredith cases and a number of other things, but we eventually got to know each other.

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JULIE COHEN:
You know, you tell that story fairly coolly now, were you really that relaxed about it?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
I had lived with injustice all of my life and always hated it. And I was used to being excluded, I was used to kind of being shut aside. I was used to being not admitted to the library when I was a little girl and I always was testing everything. So there was never a time from the time I could toddle or think that I didn't hate segregation, and these things build up. And there was nothing that I was not prepared to do and I think that it was extraordinary to be willing to die for something-

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-but going to Mississippi and being determined to change. I was very determined, not relaxed, but just determined. And it was no surprise. That had been much of what you got growing up, and so I wasn't surprised to walk into this place and have a hostile set of lawyers or a hostile judge or to find hostile police officers or sheriffs, and in many ways I was lucky being a

woman because I got away with things that many Black men would have absolutely been wiped out if they had tried to do.

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JULIE COHEN:
Like what?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Oh my goodness. I had a dance that I used to go through with Suggs Ingram who was a really dumb, mean sheriff up in Grenada County. And whenever I'd go to get my clients out of Sugg's jail, he would lock the door. And we would go through this thing. I would bam on the door and Suggs would sit there and ignore me as if I wasn't at the door and then I would say, “Suggs, open up.” Then I'd go for a phone booth and I'd say, “Sugs, open up the cotton picking door.” And so we would go through this ritual. It was funny.

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And I would always beat him in court, but that was a part of the kind of resistance that went on. But you know, I was never afraid. And one of the things that happened was that it was a community. Every night a debriefing community, I mean all the SNCC kids, everybody would come back to the office in the evening and say, “How was your day?” And Stokely was probably the funniest of them because we'd laugh about who got run off the plantation,

who just dodged a bullet, who had to choose between the mob and- the police mob and the regular citizens mob.

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But that was a part of the expectations of life that poor Blacks in Mississippi lived with and we were very clear about what we were in the midst of and we were very determined that we were going to change that. And it was scary in some ways, but we were not deterred by that because folks down there had no choice.

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JULIE COHEN:
And your admission to the bar was historic. Can you say a little more about that?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Oh, I was the first African American Women to be admitted to the Mississippi Bar. And there were no other women, I don't think I ever saw another woman lawyer in any place in the four years that I stayed in Mississippi, but I guess it was a big deal. But I never thought about being a first of anything. I just kind of did what I had to do to get through what I had to do each day. So when I now hear in retrospect that this was historic and that I was the first Black woman, that didn't cross my mind at the time. I was just getting in the bar. I had to get in the bar. I was trying to practice law. I was trying to change

Mississippi. In fact I don't think I ever thought about being the first of anything. I just was following the need.

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JULIE COHEN:
And when in Mississippi, you started getting a sense of what the conditions were, that it seems like maybe even beyond what you expected, is that right?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Well, Mississippi was extraordinarily poor. I mean, as always, the Black population was extraordinarily poor. The plantation system and the sharecropping was ten-amount to a peanut system. The first time I went down to Mississippi in that visit as a law student, I slept in a bed. They were nice enough to give me a spot in their bed. There were three of us, and sometimes there were four of you. And people got very little share. I also learned a lesson as a lady lawyer because I came down in the whole- A lot of people in town would come out to hear, to see a lady lawyer.

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They heard there was a lady lawyer in town and I had on my Dungarees, my jeans and my college clothes as a young person, and they were so disappointed because that wasn't what their image was. I never went out on the field again without dressing up. But things were extraordinarily poor and

mean, and I mean it was a total apartheid system and people were sharecropping. They didn't have enough to eat and they lived in shacks.

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They had no rights and fear was palpable. I mean violence was rampant. I saw 60 Minutes recently and they were talking about Amite County and Herbert Lee, the murder that went on down there, and I started laughing because every time we would go through McComb or Amite County or Liberty, Mississippi, it was always on the floor boards because you didn't want to get caught in Amite at night. And it was a scary place but the suffering was palpable,-

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-but again the courage and the endurance and the grit of local people in Mississippi never ceased to inspire me and to amaze me. And I still try to figure out how to be half as good as those people were. And they used to bug me to death even after I left Mississippi to do this or do that or do that, and they never gave up trying to make the world better for children, but it was terrible.

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JULIE COHEN:
Tell me a little bit about the role that you played in getting RFK focused on the issue of poverty in Mississippi.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:

Well, the poverty program began in the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1964 and the Head Start program was a key part of what was needed, and the state of Mississippi refused to take Head Start so civil rights groups and church groups applied for it under a single exception under that law, ran one of the most wonderful Head Start programs in the nation, and 11,000 children, 3,000 new jobs outside the plantation structure and the state structure, and it was a revolution.

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And children had hope and parents saw what their kids could do. And Senator Stennis realized what a revolution this could bring about in Mississippi with all these poor Black folk and children learning these radical things and seeing Black kids and their textbooks and parents participating in their children's learning, and so he said he was going to hold up all the money for the poverty program unless this program was defunded.

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So that was my first big lesson in federal, state, real politics because Senator Stennis and Senator Eastland and Representative Jamie Whitten were among the most powerful people in Congress. And so they told Sergeant Shriver in the Johnson White House that if they didn't defund this program, they were going to cut off all this money. And we fought back. They cut it off initially and parents ran this program for four or five months. They immediately said that the program was wasting money and that we were really not using the money for what was intended, and there were hearings.

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And I got called to Washington by Senator Joe Clark and Javits and others to testify about the mismanagement of this wonderful Head Start program, and came. And then I invited them to come down to Mississippi and see how wonderful this was. There may be some small mismanagement, but nothing like what it was about. So they came and did a hearing, and Bobby Kennedy came down, and with Bobby Kennedy came press, to hold these hearings about the effectiveness of the poverty program,-

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-particularly Head Start, and I thought I was going to testify on Head Start, but I don't know what moved me to talk about hunger because I guess I stayed out on the field a lot and was often visiting poor parents and they were very angry in the state after the summer project of '64 and they really were encouraging people to leave the state if you were poor and you were sharecroppers. They wanted you to get out of there, and they began to transfer over from food commodities, which was the federal food program that were free to food stamps, which cost two dollars a person and people who had no income couldn't afford food stamps.

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And hunger and even starvation was increasing. And that's what came out of my mouth that day when the senators were there, listening about the hunger. And there were a couple of Republican senators who said, Senator George Murphy and Senator Prouty from Vermont, that if people were hungry and starving, then we should do something about it. And the Democrats kind of

got a little eager to make sure they were not one upped, and I invited them to come up and see the empty cupboards and the people who had nothing, and they said they'd do it.

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And that turned out to be very, very important because Robert Kennedy did take the press with him and we went to visit poor sharecroppers, went through their houses, saw no food in the refrigerator and that's when Robert Kennedy got went through a place- went through a house where there was a baby with a bloated belly sitting on a dirt floor in a sharecropper's shack in Cleveland, Mississippi. And he tried to make that boy, that baby respond.

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The baby, it did no response, and I was very moved by him and I just watched him become palpably angry in seeing this child who was clearly malnourished and even worse. And he came out of there—there were no television cameras—and he came out and he was furious and got a determination he was going to get food down there, and he went through the rest of those houses and saw the people with empty cupboards and empty refrigerators and children who had no lunch and had no breakfast.

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And he went back to Washington the next day to see Orville Freeman who was Secretary of Agriculture then with my husband, now husband, who was his legislative assistant, and said, "Arnold, you got to go down there and get some food down there and you got to stop the food stamp charges." And

Orville Freeman said, “There are no people in America who are hungry and have no income.” And he said, “I just saw them. I went through there.”

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But anyway Freeman didn't believe him and so he sent his own staff back down with my husband to go back to the same places and to see these people who had no income. And he, Robert Kennedy, became a very big proponent of expanding food programs, out of getting the 60 Minutes piece that he never lived to see and badgering everybody in the world to kind of hold hearings, and he eventually made it clear that it wasn't just Mississippi where there was child hunger, but that it was all over the South and eventually all over the country.

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And it led to major, major reforms and food programs in the '70s. And we virtually, I think, wiped out hunger, and then the Reagan Administration came in and took us backwards. And look at where we are now. I often comment that there was a New York Times piece in last six to nine months by Jason DeParle, front page of the New York Times, that said that one in fifty Americans had no income,-

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-that some six million Americans were dependent on food stamps as their basic safety net program and not a peep. I keep commenting, “Did you all read this piece? Six million Americans with no income and nobody seems to get upset about it.” And so we are back facing the same kinds of problems but with so… we need our Robert Kennedy and we need our Martin Luther King,

and the real question is how do we get our country to just provide the most basic safety net for people and how do we get our country to wake up?

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JULIE COHEN:
That early political experience, did that play a role in your decision to come up here? I want you to talk a little bit about coming up here and what you started here and why.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
I moved well because the hunger was going on. Dr. King got involved in the hunger issue. It was pretty clear in 1966, '67 that you had to address the social economic problems if the political civil rights were going to have meaning. I wasn't winning a case. If I won a school desegregation case and the next day my plaintiffs names were tacked up on the telegram post and they were out of jobs, had no food, had no place to go,-

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-pushed off their plantations, were shot at, and so you had to kind of address those issues of hunger and jobs and health and the quality of education that they got. And that was given great impotence when that committee came down, and Robert Kennedy and Joe Clark and others took on the hunger issue and Dr. King got engaged, and I would stay in touch with Robert Kennedy all

during that period. And on my way back after a visit to Washington, I stopped in, as I always did, to see him when I was here-

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-and then to see Dr. King in Atlanta on the way back to Jackson. And Robert Kennedy told me, after he asked me how things were going in Mississippi, and I said I was horrified by how slow everything was and how little progress, and by this time the country was preoccupied with the Vietnam War, and the money was going there. Johnson was preoccupied. He needed the help of his Southern congress people and senators to fund that war, and so people were forgetting what was going on in these poor communities across the country. And so I shared my frustration with Robert Kennedy and told him I was going to see Dr. King on the way back to Jackson and he said,-

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-"Tell him to bring the poor to Washington." And he was by this time running for President, for the Democratic nomination. And we needed to let the people see the poor, see their- hear their needs. And so I was the transmitter of this message and Dr. King had a very, very modest office in Atlanta and he was sitting by himself always, constantly, in the end, trying to figure out what is the next step to take and he was often depressed about what to do.

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He was depressed about the war. He saw the poverty that was around him. He helped us very much in the refunding battle of our Head Start program. And when I told him what Robert Kennedy had said, to bring the poor to Washington, his face lit up. And, what did he say? He made me think that I

was an angel delivering a message and he went home and told Coretta that this was the right thing to do.

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His staff didn't like it a whole lot but the bottom line was that became the Poor People's Campaign and his mobilization, and there was a big split about whether the CLC, his organization, should be focused on ending the war, or whether it should be on the war on poverty, and obviously he chose the war on poverty but it was so difficult for him. With internal dissension and with his making that very courageous speech against the war at Riverside where everybody turned against him,-

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-the combination of talking about fair treatment for the poor, but he died in 1968. I moved to Washington to work on the Poor People's Campaign and his last Sunday sermon was at the Washington National Cathedral warning about… He'd given the talk about the parable of Dives, the poor man Lazarus and the rich man Dives, and warned that American was in danger of going to hell like Dives did, not because it was rich, he was rich, but because he accused his brother.

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And he called for this Poor People's Campaign at a time when there were 11 million poor children. Gosh, if he were living today, and we've got 15.5 million poor children, I have no doubt that he'd be out here trying to call for and leading a Poor People's Campaign. His last Sunday sermon title, which he'd

call it on the day of his assassination to his mother in Memphis, he told her he was going to preach on why America may go to hell next summer- Sunday.

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And it was again if we don't share our richness, the blessings of our wealth with all of those that need the basic necessities of life, we're going to go to hell. And I think that we need to hear his prophecy and see how we can begin to respond because our gap now between the rich and poor is higher than it's ever been and the issues- How do we find our voice? How do we cut through this cacophony?

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How do we deal with this extraordinary period where we actually have the richest distribution of income upwards and poor children getting poorer, and 80% not educated if you're Black and poor, and schools and healthcare and homelessness rising? What are we talking about giving more tax cuts to millionaires and billionaires? It's outrageous.

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JULIE COHEN:
I want you to tell me what this organization is, what it's called, why you started it.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:

The original organization was a public interest law firm that came out of the Poor People's Campaign. It was called the Washington Research Project and I had been given a check and I was standing up at the bank and said, “What are we going to call this thing?” I was trying to prepare the policy papers for the People's Campaign and that was the Washington Research Project. And after Dr. King's assassination, we stayed in business to try to implement many of the demands that the Poor People's Campaign had raised, but we focused first on hunger, which was the prime thing.

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And other people got involved and we began to make progress. We moved on to the next thing, which was Title 1 of the Elementary Secondary Education Act. And I must say that it sounds like we're doing complete circles ‘cause we're still making the same demands both on hunger and jobs and on Title 1, but we had a public interest law firm for the first five years as a way of trying to see how we could enforce federal civil rights and poverty laws for the poor in the places like Mississippi.

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But it was pretty clear that whatever you called Black and poor was going to face a shrinking constituency and that we had to find new ways of tapping across race and class, and the Poor People's Campaign was a cross racial campaign. Whites, Blacks, Native Americans, Latinas, seeking jobs, seeking income, seeking education and a better life for their children. And so we, in a sense, just picked up where the Poor People's Campaign left off, but we began to see that the prevention and early intervention in children might be—

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—and it was Head Start and its influence on me—that might be the basis for what we should do. The day after Dr. King was assassinated, I had gone out into the schools 'cause there were riots that had broken out all over America including here in Washington. And I went out into the schools and the riots in our neighborhoods to talk to children and tell them not to loot and not to get arrested and not to lose their future, risk their futures. There was a little boy about eleven or twelve, looked at me straight in the eye and said, "Lady, what future? Ain't got no future. Ain't got nothing to lose."

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And I've been trying for the past forty years to prove that boy's truth wrong and I'll spend the rest of my life trying to do that. I think of that boy all the time. I mean I… That boy's truth in this economically, wealthy and militarily powerful, but spiritually anemic nation is a truth that I'm trying to change and will spend the rest of my life trying to change.

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And here we are at a time when the chief national security issue facing this country is the failure of this nation to invest in its children, where you've got a majority of all of our children who can't read and write and compete at grade level, in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade, and we're talking about budget deficits, cutting education when children can't read and write.

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Who's going to be our workforce? Where you've got millions of children without healthcare, where you've got millions of children at home without

food. I mean, we're fighting the wrong deficit. It's the human capital deficit that's going to do us in and it's also our moral Achilles heel, it's our economic Achilles heel, and I am more mission driven than I have ever been to say, "Wake up country, because you're killing yourselves and this is what's going to topple us as a nation."

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And so that the urgency of the mission is so great, both because I love my country and want it to sort of realize and live up to its ideals because I see those little boys out there all the time, and the whole premise of the American dream is that your children are going to do better than you did and our children, in all races, are not going to do better than we did. We're moving backwards. In many ways, the Black child faces one of the worst crises, if not the worst crisis, since slavery and we can't go backwards. We're about to watch this prison pipeline undermine the last fifty years of progress.

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If you combine seventy percent illiteracy- I'm sorry, seventy percent of children being born out of wedlock in the Black community, and it's a problem that affects the whole society. If you look at one in three Black boys going off to prison, 40% Black children being born poor, and over 80% can't read at grade level in fourth, eighth and twelfth grade and 40% drop out, what is that? I mean, that is a new incarceration. That is a new slavery. That is a new apartheid.

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And so, to watch it go back so quickly, and to watch those little boys grow, and while the nation has gotten wealthier and wealthier and more of that wealth has gone to the few at the expense of the many, it's to watch America sort of lose itself and lose it so and lose it's edge, competitive edge, and so how do you keep yelling, "Wake up! Wake up!" I mean, you're fighting the wrong deficit and we're fighting the wrong wars.

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The war is right here, and the best way we're going to end our world lead, in a world that's two-thirds non-White and two-thirds poor, and just recognize that it's what we are at home, and particularly now when Black and Brown and Native American children—children of color—are going to be a majority of our child population by 2019. You may not like them, but you're going to need them. So, I'm sure I went on to the next thing too. But that's…

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JULIE COHEN:
I want to ask you just a couple questions about the women's movement. Do you have strong recollections of the early women's rights protests and were you aware of the women's movement when it was starting to form around the same time that you were involved in the civil rights struggle?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:

I was, but Black women have always had to work, right? We've always… what Alice Walker calls us womanists. But our agendas were not always the same, and I've always felt very strongly about the need for bridges between the White women's movement if you will, the more privileged women's movement which was more about me and my freedom and my status, when the Black women's movement-

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-was really about kind of how do we make sure that our children have enough to eat and how do we make sure that we have healthcare? And so there was both- I support it, the aspirations of the overall women's movement, but I often differed with them over the priorities within that. And I'm glad it happened and it needs to continue to happen and I hate the fact that the women's movement has somehow now begun to be summed up with you guys again. We've come all this way to sort of have women call "you guys."

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I'm probably the only person that still corrects people when they say that. But I think that it played an important role and still has much to go and women's rights are under attack now, but I think that the key that we have always felt at the Children's Defense Fund, is that since women have been the disproportionate parent, pulled the disproportionate amount of parenting in the Black community, it was really about childcare and early childhood experiences.

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It was about healthcare and that Medicaid was a- We've never taken a position on abortion because we felt that there's enough people doing that, but the issue is what do you do to get healthcare because I've always thought reproductive rights was about the right to have a healthy child, as well as a right to have no child if that's what you wanted to do. But we focused on that right to have healthy children, and I was much more into Medicaid expansions and healthcare and prenatal care and child health coverage and still am. And so while there was a lot of range of support on specific issues,-

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-we've always focused on a women's agenda that related to the working women—our mothers and our sisters and the folk that raised these children who are poor. And in that sense, I think there was often a diversion. Not always. And we did not take a lot of positions and… they used to get very angry when we would not take a position on abortion. I said, "We have nothing new to add on that. I'm for all those children who are here and they have far fewer voices that are powerful to be heard."

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And so, we made progress on childcare, which has helped all women. We've made progress on a lot of issues including healthcare that have helped everybody, and I think that's been important and the women's movement needs to keep pushing. Betty Friedan is a very good friend, Gloria Steinem is a very good friend, and I think that- And Dorothy Height, which was on our board for thirty-one years, was always with one foot in both camps, and so women and children still are the folk that we've got to speak up for in this

society because equality still is not a reality for many despite the extraordinary progress.

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JULIE COHEN:
When you talked earlier about your experiences both in Bennettsville and in Mississippi, of not being accepted, taken seriously, in some instances, open resistance and hostility to you, I'm wondering, obviously that can be discouraging, does it also have, like, a motivating effect on one? Does it strengthen your resolve?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
You can't let other people define who you are. And one of the lessons of my childhood with people of faith was that you're a child of God. You could look down on nobody and nobody can look down on you. And you cannot let other people define who you are. I happen to believe that every child is sacred, that I'm sacred, and that I've got to respond to others in that way and so… it's something that has to ground children.

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And we're teaching our children in freedom schools that there's something inside you that is so strong, that nobody can touch that. So they tell you that you're not good enough, that you can't make it, you just say, "I'm going to do it anyway." And I think that trying to get young people and children to know

that they are spiritual beings that can't be defined by men, by people of a different race, which is a myth, and that girls are as precious and sacred and smart, sometimes I think smarter than boys, that the measure of our successes is inside.

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It's inside our hearts and heads. And my two great role models are two brilliant slave women who were deeply grounded—Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. But they just had the… firm sense of who they were as human beings created by God that nobody else could touch. And here in this country, and too often in our world, it's always you're defined by things and by status, and I mean, sometimes I look at these budget debates—excuse me—and I said,-

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- "Who raised these people? Who said that it was okay to take from poor babies in order to have a third yacht or have whatever?" But so I think it's the grounding of our Judeo-Christian tradition, and the teaching of my parents, and the example of those extraordinarily great women in Mississippi, who really believed in what the Bible said. And that… we were not creatures created by men, but we were creations of something higher than that, and so try to remember that.

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And not let other people dictate who they think you are and all this American materialism Dr. King warned about, and excessive individualism and excessive militarism, the need to lord over others, the power, the money, the

things he said would be our undoing. And I must say, I think I tend to agree with him.

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JULIE COHEN:
What is the most meaningful piece of advice you ever got?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
It was from my father. "Follow the need. God runs a full employment economy and that service is the rent that each of us pays for living." And I've tried to sort of live that creed.

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JULIE COHEN:
What is the one piece of advice you'd give a young woman on having a work-life balance between your kids and your career?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
It's hard. And you've got to figure out how to do that. There's no blueprint, but I think that the bottom line is that children have to come first. If I had a choice between staying home with a sick child and having a business meeting, I would stay home with my sick child and it's just hard work. And

you've got to have a support system and a community, but it's hard. But you can do it.

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JULIE COHEN:
What's the accomplishment you're most proud of?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
My children.

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JULIE COHEN:
What was your very first paying job?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
As a law student in the first year in law school at a law firm in New York when I was very involved with the Legal Defense Fund, the NAACP. But my first paying job was when I went to Mississippi as a lawyer and I made $7,200 a year. I didn't know how I was going to live and pay off my loans and I haven't saved as much money since then. I mean, my house was $92 a month, but the Legal Defense Fund and the NAACP, which is one of the great, great, great gifts of my life paid me $7,200 dollars to move back to Mississippi and the

second year $5,000, and the third year $3,500, because Mississippi was so cheap, I saved money.

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JULIE COHEN:
Okay. Which three adjectives best describe you?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Persistent. Absolutely committed to seeing that every child is justly treated. And determined. Determined. Persistent. I just don't give up. And I have very deep beliefs about social justice and that's dictated by my faith, and so… I guess… I'm caring or just committed to try to live one's faith through how children are treated in this world. But I'm never going to give up.

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