Life Stories
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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Marian Wright Edelman, Mississippi Director, NAACP
March 20, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 21 minutes and 41 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

00:00:03:00

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
We can all keep going and keep struggling, even when we don't know what that next step is. But we are people of faith, and we will trust God, and we will keep trying to do God's work on earth.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Learning
King in The Wilderness Collection
Marian Wright Edelman
Activist

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INTERVIEWER:
Tell us about the first time you met Doctor King.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Well, I met him when I was a senior at Spelman College, and he came to speak in chapel and chapel was compulsory. And I was a rebel about that, too. Except that I remember more about chapel now, than about all my classes. And the first thing I did and I began to chair the Spelman board, was to reinstitute compulsory chapel. But we had all the great speakers of our time, and this was in my senior year of 1960. In 1959/60, I had been abroad for 15 months studying abroad. Spellman was really ahead of the term then. And he came to speak in the chapel, and I remember it as if it was yesterday. And I quote him right now. And when I'm having a hard time, I think of what he says about never giving up. But he talked about nonviolence and he talked about love. And more importantly, he talked about the importance of keep going forward and keep moving forward. And he said, if you can't fly, you drive, you can't drive, you run, you can't run, you walk. If you can't walk, you crawl, but keep moving forward. And it rings in my head. When you are dealing with all these folk in Washington who keep wanting to move us backwards, but we're never going to go backwards. Never. And we're going to build on the progress of the last almost 50 years, which has been progress and ebbs and flows go forward, go backwards. But we've gone forward a lot, and we are going to finish this job of ending poverty in America, by starting with our children.

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INTERVIEWER:
Did you get that sense when you first saw him speak, that he understood the burden of this movement, what he was taking on, that changing the world and the weight that might have been.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Oh, yes. He was always accessible. And I think that most of the times I saw him, he was depressed and didn't know what he was going to do next. But he was always accessible, and I think I went to meet him right after that, said, I want to come see him. He can come see me. And I loved him because he was one of those adults who didn't feel he had to have all the answers, who could listen, who didn't feel ashamed to say, I don't know what the next steps are going to be. And I guess most of the many of the conversations I had was when he was struggling, like we were struggling, for the next steps.

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INTERVIEWER:
Can you talk about how your relationship with him changed? How did it evolve? The first inkling.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
That it's going well when you're 19 and you don't know, you say, I want to come see you after that wonderful talk. Okay. And, and he said certainly. And

again, the accessibility was always there. And I remember he had to bump because, President [unclear] was coming, but he kept his word. He was always there to kind of talk one on one. And during that year, which is when the sit-ins began to bubble up, then Greensboro happened. And obviously, all of us in Atlanta were absolutely determined to follow. And we set up our own committee for Human Rights and published an appeal for human rights. And we're meeting with our college presidents. Who and the chief of police in Atlanta, they were more about containment, but wanting to listen. And Doctor Mays was all of our North Star in many ways. But during that period when, again, they were more concerned about keeping the lid on, but they were accessible. We were talking to the college presidents, and they asked that we do this campaign for human rights: write a statement and I must say, I rewrote it. It stands up as well today as it stood, that it was terrific. But when Greensboro came, that was clearly the signal to say, we can do this, too. And we met very, very quietly and planned it and then met with our college presidents and laid out what we were about. And I think it was one of the best sit-ins, and because we picked all public places, I went to City Hall. I led a delegation to city hall. But we took public places, bus stations and the court and state house. But it was always the places where we knew we'd have the best legal chance. And, you know, that was the first sound. And then the question was what was next. And who was there? Our six college--seven college presidents were there to welcome their students, but more importantly, Dr. King flew up from Montgomery to welcome us. Knowing that we have sort of gone against the grain, and it was just a wonderful reaffirmation. And -- then we moved to--when SNCC began to get formed and Ella Baker, and sitting with him for those days at Shaw. But again, that was

really another thing of affirming the power of young people and the voice of young people. And we'd never forgotten it.

INTERVIEWER [00:05:14] But I'd like to talk to the Poor People's Campaign, how that came about. You talked really eloquently about visiting RFK and then bringing this message to King.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Well. Mississippi wanted black folk to leave. They didn't want to be there to vote. They didn't want to feed them, they were trying to starve them out. They were trying to -- the violence continue. The attacks on federal programs and moving to food stamps where people had no income and it was inconceivable to many people back then that there was no income. And it was terrible in '65 and '66 and '67. And hunger was epidemic. And the-- if you went out, as I did, try to go out every day or every week in the communities you just saw the suffering. And-- you had to do something. And the Poverty Program and CDGM (Child Development Group of Mississippi) brought a lot of hearings and harassment about why the federal government was giving this group of church folk and civil rights folk and that we were mis-spending the money, I was its general counsel. But in the middle of it all, and I was talking about head start and Stannis was there to testify, I said that people were starving in the Delta and that they should come see it. And to my absolute joy, they agreed to do it, and Amsey could tell you exactly where to go out on one day's notice, a half days notice. That was-- the thing that really sealed me with--with Robert Kennedy. Because I had an image about

Kennedy's. We went up in the Delta, and we -- and Amsey found these children with bloated bellies and with-- had had no food, and poor parents. And watching Robert Kennedy, outside of the cameras, was one of the most moving experiences, and there's a famous incident of going in the back door of the baby with the mother in a dark room, I don't think they even had a wooden floor, sitting there, and I watched him sitting there, just poke to try to get any kind of reaction out of that child, and couldn't and you know--and I -- it changed my whole sense about who he was, and he came outside, he was somebody who touched a lot, which was surprising, I mean when I would say hello, he would just kind of you know, do a little pat. And he touched a child, there was some older children standing outside with lots of reporters who hadn't gone inside to look at Annie's child, and we asked the little boy what he had for breakfast, he had nothing yet, and asked him what he had for lunch and, nothing yet, and -- you could just see--how any adult and parent would respond to that. And the second thing that happened on that trip--with the committee traveling out to see hungry families-- was in, I think it was in Cleveland, Mississippi, but in one of the Delta counties, and a little boy, little white boy's dog ran out in front of the processional--what do you say when you got a -- all the cars out there screeching, I mean they are the-- what do you call them--at any rate, our procession of cars, and the child's dog ran out and got killed, and Robert Kennedy was furious and stopped it-- got out to talk to the boy. And told them to cut off the sirens, and so I became a groupie then, I had had a very different image about who he was. And he went back after this trip and with Joe Clark, they went over to see Arnold Freeman the next morning cause they got to get the food down there. And they became--they began to be pushers. And yet it was hard, even for Kennedy,

and even with key people on committees and bipartisan people trying to do something. But at any rate, he stuck with it and -- in August, I'd gone to see him at Hickory Hill just on my way back to Jackson and-- he was around his pool and I told him how bad things were and nothing was moving and they were still charging for food stamps. Change is hard, folks, and you have to stick with it. I told him I was going to stop through Atlanta and see Martin and he said, tell him to bring the poor to Washington. By this time he was running, he had decided he was running for president. And-- I went down to Atlanta from there before I went to Jackson, and went to SCLC, and -- he was depressed. I mean he was sitting in his office by himself. He was-- all of us were struggling--he was struggling to see, what do you do next? You had the Vietnam War, the country's attention was moving away from civil rights-- and from the poor. And I walked in, and he was by himself in the back of-- I loved it, he always lived very modestly, and this was a very modest office. And he was--he was depressed. And I told him what Robert Kennedy said, he ought to bring the poor to Washington, and he lit up, he just lit up. And he went home, you can see what Coretta said about it. And he immediately began to sort of get the staff who was not happy, I'll just tell you that--engaged and people came up from Marks, Mississippi just to talk to him, and he had been in Marks. He'd been in Marks for a funeral and had gone to a center and saw children who were-- the teacher had one apple for lunch, and she carved up that apple for four kids. And that was the first time Ralph Abernathy said he saw Martin cry in public, he had to leave the school because he couldn't believe they were each getting a fourth of an apple. And the hungry Marks was palpable. But any rate, he responded immediately, and called his staff together who was not happy about this. And there was robust debate over the

ensuing months over whether Vietnam should be the big issue or whether it should be economic opportunity and jobs and obviously it was--obvious by then that the next step that the talking about changing laws was to get people jobs. They had to eat, they had to survive, they had to work, they had to have an income. And -- so that was a very interesting follow on set of months, but he stuck with it. And committed himself to doing a poor people's campaign.

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INTERVIEWER:
Tell us a little bit about early.

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Well, Airlie House was a gathering or a retreat, where -- I don't remember how many of us there were, I mean whether it was 40 or 50, Joan Baez was my roommate, but I'd never saw her. And -- but Andy and all of his people. There were some outside folk. And it was about where do we go next? And -- I always loved it because he had a very big tolerance for different views. And Bevel is not a -- was not an easy man to -- and I loved Hosea Williams. I mean they all had very strong views. And Jesse preached, in fact I remember Jesse really did preach. And -- and Martin listened. But it was a very robust discussion about where one should go next with a lot of resentment about this poor people's campaign. And that Vietnam was the issue and that black boys were dying over there and that was draining all the money. On the other hand, you had all these hungry people right here in America with no jobs and no income. And I don't think he wavered, and he waited for Andy, always to

find the bridge--Young--to find the bridge between all these robust discussants. Who never were lacking for a word or a view. And again, the patience of Jobe, as far as I'm concerned, I go -- I'm for having opposing views with some -- saying, here's where we're going. But-- he was amazing, but it was a very moving meeting. A good meeting of open--debate. And-- and Jesse-- it's funny I can't remember Jesse's sermon but he sure did preach. And--we moved away from there knowing we were going to do a poor people's campaign, not with a plan, not with whatever, but that this is where he thought he should be next, but he also spoke on both, because they were so interrelated. And -- again, the bridge role, and the listener role, and the trying to find the way forward.

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INTERVIEWER:
That brings us to the assassination and how terrible that was. Can you tell us about where you were, how you heard about it, and what that changed for you?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
It was awful. And on some level, I think, it was inevitable. I wasn't surprised, but it was shocking. It was awful. And-- riots broke out as you know, everywhere. And my first thought, including in the district, and my first thought was to go out and tell children not to loot and not to-- riot and get-- and ruin their lives. I went down to the schools to try to tell kids, for goodness sakes don't--don't--don't loot and don't ruin your future, and this

little boy-- about 12 looked me straight in the eye and said, "lady, what future? I ain't got no future, I ain't got nothing to lose." And I've been trying to answer that boy for the last 45 years. And I think about him, tell him essential truth in this-- incredibly rich, powerful nation who has not the decency to assure every child a future. But-- we were devastated. And we were -- it was just absolutely devastating. Not surprising, but it was devastating, it was kind of inevitable. And he was-- very depressed back then in many ways, it was -- but he would keep going. I mean he would keep going, but I think that he saw -- if you look at his last sermons, you could hear inevitability in his death--in his voice. And--but even so, when the inevitable happens, you're not prepared for it. And-- the -- the funeral was the funeral and the march was the march and-- it was--but the first thought for me was you know, how do you get up tomorrow morning and keep it going? And that you honor him by what you do. And you know it was--nobody had enough time to mourn, we were depressed but you had to get up and sort of carry on that and--and so that just refocused us. I don't know how you carry forward without your leader. And with a very cantankerous, depressed staff. But we lived. And I'm glad we did because I'm of the few that it has led to things--that it will continue to lead to things, and this country is going to end poverty, and we're going to end child poverty. He really was a prophet who spoke the truth about who we are and-- and I site often his-- his concern that we are going to integrate into a burning house--riddled by excessive militarism and materialism, and greed and that when somebody who heard him that night, cause he was very depressed, at the end I mean he thought the country was going to hell. That-- when they asked him, you know well what should we be doing? And he said, we--we--we--we all had to kind of become a -- raise our voices--and -- and --

and-- and -- go to a different level of protest. But I think that-- you know, he laid a major foundation for all of us, and his speeches are as prescient today as they were then, we just have to-- we can figure out how to listen to him and follow him rather than just applauding.

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INTERVIEWER:
Do you miss him as a man? As a person?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
Oh yes. Oh yes. Only thing I never liked about him was his--the-- he never did a good--I'm a firm hand-shaker [laughing]. He always had a thing--I'd never call him a cold fish hand-shaker, but he -- but again, he was just a good human being, ok? And he was always accessible, I don't think there was ever a time that I needed to see him that I couldn't see him or worry about. And -- and that--and he didn't feel that he had all the answers and so you could figure out it's ok for you to have to struggle and not to know everything, and to trust god, ok? And that you're not alone. And I still-- you listen to that sermon in the middle of the night--the time when he-- [unclear] in his home. When he was sitting there saying -- where-- but you could almost feel the presence of god saying march--stand up and so he-- he -- he's a man who lived his faith, sacrificed for his faith, had an uncommon eloquence, an uncommon patience. An uncommon patience. And I just hope I can be one tenth as good and-- and have the staying power that he had. But he was a true prophet in our time,

and to be able to have been part of that, and to have learned from him, and to have the privilege of carrying on in some small way, what he began

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INTERVIEWER:
What's the biggest misconception about the real Doctor King that you'd like to correct?

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MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN:
The real misconception--J. Edgar Hoover tried to destroy, you know, his character, whatever. But he was a man of deep faith and deep courage. Who loved his country so much he was willing to die for it. But to die for it nonviolently and at the hands of violence. And if we can't and if-- you know, what he talked about in terms of gun violence and the violence of war, and Bobby Kennedy after he was assassinated -- gave a great speech about violence and we need to hear him. We need to hear him. And not to deify him. Not to-- to -- make him into something he wasn't, but his message was the message as Abraham Joshua Heschel said, he was a prophet for our time. We don't need to praise him and build statues to him, we need to follow him. Because he was not a perfect human being, he did not pretend to be a perfect human being. Was always struggling, was scared like the rest of us. But he was a man of god who had a message. And if you listened to that speech in his home, about -- midnight-- and not knowing where to go, but that we can all keep going and keep struggling even when we don't know what that next step is, but we are people of faith and we will trust god and we will keep trying to

do god's work on earth. And we will-- let it go at our peril and so the chore between us, particularly now in this time, is to move us back toward community and toward decency and toward service and toward-- equality of opportunity. And-- and to make sure that every child has a level playing field. And so that -- the point of honoring him is to-- is to-- don't have a Martin Luther King day, you go out and do the work. And you make sure that every child has a chance to--to be who they are and to get a decent education and to be fed and you fight people who try to take away the basic safety net and you get out here-- black folk and brown folk and everybody else. And don't just have a holiday, you-- you do the work of saving your children and saving the values of your nation and so -- the only way you can honor him, as far as I'm concerned is by carrying on what he started, and boy are we faced with extraordinary stuff today and so that the issue is what kind of movement will we do to end child poverty first, and to end poverty in America. And so he is as prescient today, as relevant today and his issue is as much of a call to us today as he was calling to us in 1968 and I hope we will honor that call and hear that call and finish the next phase of his movement.

END TC: 00:21:45:00