Olivia Golden
February 26, 2019

A Tribute to Marian Wright Edelman

Comments delivered at NYU Law School

It's an honor to be here with such distinguished colleagues to honor Marian Wright Edelman. Marian was my first boss when I came to DC, more than 25 years ago. I've thought of her and what I learned from her so many times over those years—and especially in the last two years. In this time that has demanded strength, clarity, strategy, and passion above what any of us thought we could give, Marian has been my gold standard.

And of course, I'm just one of many people who came to Marian early in a career and soaked up what she had to teach. From the beginning, she has left an extraordinary legacy of younger leaders. From the CDF staff and Board, her alums include Hillary Clinton and Maggie Williams, along with Geoffrey Canada and Angela Glover-Blackwell, whom I met as young rising stars on the CDF Board, as well as people who may be less famous to the outside world but who are essential to advocacy for children and low-income people in Washington, DC. That includes people like Debbie Weinstein, the long-time leader of the Coalition for Human needs, Cliff Johnson, the creator of a child and families advocacy team at the National League of Cities, and Arloc Sherman, the brilliant numbers expert at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

What did all of us in this CDF diaspora learn from Marian? Three themes keep coming back to me:

First, Marian taught us to hold on stubbornly to our own core values and instincts. She taught by example and sometimes by words that we should never allow others to define our mission in life or the values we hold dearest. She often quoted a phrase she attributed to her childhood: "Assign yourself"—meaning that each of us holds the responsibility for figuring out what needs to be done.

One of my most vivid CDF memories is a story told to me by the late Paul Smith, our beloved research and data guru, who had been with Marian for years and served some of us newer recruits as a guide. He said to me once, "You always need to remember that somewhere inside Maran is still that young woman standing up to the sheriff in a small southern town." That story was about Marian's courage and defiance—but also about a good kind of stubbornness, holding a line because you knew in your own core being that it divided right from wrong. So while that story taught me a great deal about Marian, I have come to think it also captured something she taught us about ourselves: that each of us needs to find and define that stubborn core. In these last years of the Trump administration, that lesson has been constantly in my mind.

A **second** lesson that all of us who worked at CDF of course absorbed was Marian's big project: placing child advocacy at the center of an economic and racial justice advocacy agenda. She placed children at the center for two reasons: because of who they are—their vulnerability, the moral importance of how society treats them—and also because sympathy for children offers a way of engaging the public in caring about their families and communities. CDF's goal was that people's moral and emotional reaction to the suffering of children would help bridge racial and class divides and lead to solutions.

In keeping with this aim, Marian always viewed children in the context of their parents and their communities. She and CDF have been a model to a child advocacy world that can sometimes blur parents out of the picture or look for solutions that bypass them. For example, I remember how valuable I found the reports we did while I was at CDF on "Young Parents," showing that young children's poverty arises in part from the inadequate earnings of young adults. The good news is that this lesson stuck with me after I left — I've replicated that analysis in the poverty report that the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) puts together each year. But the bad news is that the grim result remains true today. CLASP's **analysis of the Census Bureau's most recent poverty data** showed that fully one in five parents under age 30 lives in poverty.

The persistence of this and other grim news about child and young adult wellbeing does raise a question about the effectiveness of centering advocacy on children. Does the bad news undermine Marian's powerful and influential insight about child advocacy as a driver for change? It's always easy to give up hope, particularly now when attacks on children—especially children in immigrant families and children of color—are so widespread and hate-filled.

But I remain convinced that advocacy for children and their families is a crucial lever for reform. For one thing, despite the disappointments, there are important successes, where children's experiences have powerfully moved people and politics, including in these past two years—perhaps most dramatically in the outcry against separating children from their parents at the border. For another, the moral urgency of child advocacy remains undimmed—children are the poorest Americans and we owe it to them to persist in fixing the damage. And finally, no single strategy for reform has ever been sufficient in itself—that's the wrong standard for success. Marian's core insight about the power of advocating for children doesn't transform the nation all by itself—but it remains indispensable many decades after her initial framing.

But in these last few months of political turmoil, I've thought most of all about a **third** lesson Marian taught me: her commitment to **both** long-term vision **and** immediate—even call it incremental—success. In my first few months at CDF, which were also my first months in Washington, I remember feeling honored and awed to be invited to a dinner Marian hosted at her home for advocacy and policy thought leaders in Washington, DC. At the end of the evening, I was a lot less awed by the thinkers and by Washington, DC—and a lot more awed by Marian. I felt truly grateful to work for someone whose vision was not bounded by what was possible in the current Congress. Her sense of the sweep of American history taught her that the limits that look permanent today could collapse tomorrow.

Yet at the same time, Marian never believed in holding off on doing good today in favor of perfection ten years from now. An old friend who worked for Marian decades ago told me a story that resonated with my own experiences. She asked Marian whether she should accept a compromise on a piece of legislation she was working on, and Marian responded: "If it will improve children's lives, then take it."

At a moment when so much commentary tries to pit big picture, visionary, long-term reforms against so-called "incremental improvements," it's especially important to hold onto this "both-and" framing. We should not delay improving people's lives right now when we have a chance AND we shouldn't hold back from the grand sweep of change over the longer haul. That lesson among so many others is one that I owe to Marian.

I don't know if the United States will come out of this perilous time with our democracy intact and with the enormous public energy for change successfully channeled to tear down the barriers of poverty and injustice. But if we do, that success will be Marian's legacy—due at least in part to her inspiration, the leaders she has guided, and the wisdom she has offered to all of us. Thank you.