

"They Cannot Fend for Themselves"

That is why Marian Edelman became a top lobbyist for children

The path that led Marian Wright Edelman to become one of Washington's most unusual lobbyists began on April 5, 1968, the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Then a civil rights lawyer practicing in Jackson, Miss., Edelman had sought out a group of black teenagers, hoping to dissuade them from violence. But when she tried to warn them that looting and rioting in the streets "may ruin your future," one boy angrily shot back, "Lady, why should I listen to you? Lady, I ain't got no future."

Haunted by the boy's hopelessness, Edelman resolved to dedicate herself to providing a better future for America's children. After nearly 20 years of work as a lobbyist, organizer and fund raiser, Edelman, 47, has emerged as a leading advocate for young people, the nation's poorest and most vulnerable group. As founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, Edelman has ensured that even though the young cannot vote or make campaign contributions, they are not ignored in Washington. In her just published book, *Families in Peril* (Harvard University Press; \$15.00), she contends, "As adults we are responsible for meeting the needs of children. It is our moral obligation. We brought about their births and their lives, and they cannot fend for themselves."

Edelman's effectiveness depends as much on her adroit use of statistics as on moral suasion. She never tires of pointing out that more than 12 million American youngsters—25% of the national total—live below the federally defined poverty level. Or that while poverty has declined among other age groups, it has risen steadily among children. Or that the 10.8 infant deaths among every 1,000 live births in 1984 gave the U.S. one of the highest infant mortality rates among 20 leading industrialized nations. (And from 1983 to 1984, the C.D.F. reported last month, infant mortality rates increased in six of the country's largest cities, including Washington.) What these numbers indicate, she says, is "a national catastrophe in the making."

Edelman is particularly concerned about teenage pregnancy, which she sees as both a cause and a consequence of poverty. The C.D.F. reports that one in every five poor teenagers is a parent. Every year, almost half a million teenage girls give birth; about 50% receive no prenatal

care in the first three months of pregnancy. Nearly one of every five babies born to adolescent mothers suffers from low birth weight. Amid growing concern about teen pregnancy, Edelman last week presided over the C.D.F.'s third annual Pregnancy Prevention Conference, which drew more than 2,000 religious leaders, social and health workers and community organizers to Washington.

The youngest daughter of a Baptist minister, Edelman inherited her sense of mission at an early age. "Helping other people, I did it as a kid like other kids go to the movies," she says. "It is what I was raised to be." When segregation laws prevented blacks in her hometown of Bennettsville, S.C., from entering public parks, her father opened a park behind



At her Washington office: the 1960s-style activist as a 1980s-style advocate
To Edward Kennedy, she is the "101st Senator on children's issues."

his church. "That taught me, if you don't like the way the world is, you change it. You have an obligation to change it. You just do it, one step at a time."

That approach has sustained a lifelong struggle for social change. In her senior year at all-black Spelman College in Atlanta, Edelman became active in the 1960s civil rights movement. While volunteering in the local office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, she became aware that there were no attorneys to represent poor blacks. She went off to Yale Law School, then became the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi bar. As a staff attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, she met her husband Peter, a fellow attorney and an adviser to Senator Robert Kennedy. Convinced she could achieve more as an advocate than as a litigant for the poor, Edelman moved to Washington in 1968 and five years later

founded the C.D.F. Says Edelman: "I still contend our problem is not one of law but of making laws work, getting them funded, riding the bureaucrats and enabling people to take advantage of what Congress intended."

If many Washington lobbyists promote their cause with cash, Edelman's currency is facts, mountains of data that tell the story of what is happening to children. The C.D.F. annually turns out more than 2,000 pages of reports, which she uses to put pressure on Congress—apparently with great success. Senator Edward Kennedy described Edelman as the "101st Senator on children's issues." Said Kennedy: "She has real power in Congress and uses it brilliantly."

Even while the Reagan Administration was trimming social spending, Edelman managed to score some victories. Last year nine federal programs known as the "children's initiative" received a \$500 million increase in its \$36 billion budget for families and children's health care, nutrition and early education. Meanwhile, under prodding from Edelman, Medicaid coverage for expectant mothers and their children was boosted in 1984, and last year Congress gave states the option of expanding Medicaid eligibility.

Edelman is not without her detractors, who accuse her of trying to solve social problems merely by throwing money at them. She responds—how else?—with statistics. According to the C.D.F., for every dollar spent on the nutrition programs for women, infants and children, three are saved by avoiding more expensive hospital care for underweight and malnourished children. Says

Edelman: "People ought to be able to distinguish between throwing money at problems and investing in success."

Nor does Edelman downplay the cost of that investment. As both the Reagan Administration and Congress have turned their attention toward welfare reform, Edelman has been warning against the delusion that the cycle of poverty and pregnancy can be broken quickly or cheaply. The intensive education and employment training that teens need both before and after childbearing "could incur equal or greater public costs than welfare," the C.D.F. reports. With teen pregnancy and poverty, says Edelman, "we are trying to change cultural signals, to change the way people think—and that doesn't happen overnight." That prospect will no doubt discourage many, but for Marian Wright Edelman it is another step on a long march.

—By Nancy Traver.
Reported by Melissa Ludtke/Washington