



SOUTH CAROLINA HALL OF FAME



Teacher Guide

Marian Wright Edelman



South Carolina Social Studies Standards

Marian Wright Edelman

Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries - The Civil Rights Movement, The Changing Political Landscape

Topics include - Segregation, Civil Rights Movement, NAACP, American Poverty (Great Society legislation), Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Vietnam, Advocacy, Children's Defense Fund

Standard 3-5: The student will demonstrate an understanding of the major developments in South Carolina in the late nineteenth and twentieth century.

3-5.5 - Summarize the development of economic, political, and social opportunities of African Americans in South Carolina, including the end of Jim Crow laws, the desegregation of schools (Briggs v. Elliott) and other public facilities; and efforts of African Americans to achieve the right to vote.

Standard 5-5: The student will demonstrate an understanding of the social, economic and political events that influenced the United States during the Cold War era.

5-5.3 - Explain the advancement of the modern Civil Rights Movement, including the desegregation of the armed forces, Brown v. Board of Education, the roles of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, the Civil Rights acts, and the Voting Rights Act.

Standard 8-7: The student will demonstrate an understanding of the impact on South Carolina of significant events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

8-7.2 - Analyze the movement for civil rights in South Carolina, including the impact of the landmark court cases Elmore v. Rice and Briggs v. Elliot; civil rights leaders Septima Poinsette Clark, Modjeska Monteith Simkins, and Matthew J. Perry; the South Carolina school equalization effort and other resistance to school integration; peaceful efforts to integrate beginning with colleges and demonstrations in South Carolina such as the Friendship Nine and the Orangeburg Massacre.

8-7.3 - Explain changing politics in South Carolina, including the role of Strom Thurmond, the shift from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, the increasing political participation of African Americans and women, and the passage of the Education Improvement Act (EIA)



S.C. Hall of Fame Biography

Marian Wright Edelman



A native of Bennettsville, SC and daughter of the late Arthur Jerome and Maggie Leola Bowen Wright, Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), has been an advocate for disadvantaged Americans for her entire professional life. Under her leadership, CDF has become the nation's strongest voice for children and families. Mrs. Edelman, a graduate of Spelman College and Yale Law School, began her career in the mid-60s when, as the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, she directed the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi. Mrs. Edelman served on the Board of Trustees of Spelman College which she chaired from 1976 to 1987 and was the first woman elected by alumni as a member of the Yale University Corporation on which she served from 1971 to 1977.



Transcript

Marian Wright Edelman

Marian Wright was born on June 6, 1939, in Bennettsville, South Carolina.

“Well, it was the defining force in my life. I grew up in a segregated, rural town [...] that told me as a black girl that I wasn’t very valuable, but I didn’t believe it, because my parents said it wasn’t so, my church leader said it wasn’t so, my teachers said it wasn’t so, so I didn’t believe it, and I always knew that I would make a difference in changing it”

“I always had to test the limits, I can’t stand being told I can’t do something, which is unjust, and I can’t stand seeing any children excluded from anything, so the—so, y’know, the seeds of much of what I do at the Children’s Defense Fund grew out of what happened in Bennettsville in many, many ways.”

She attended Spelman College in Atlanta from 1957 to 1960, an urgent time in the Civil Rights movement, and quickly became deeply involved. It was during this time she decided to pursue a law degree.

In 1960, Wright enrolled at Yale Law School.

“It had never occurred to me that I was going to go to law school, never, never. I was a pre-med student and I was a music major. And one day, I was in a sit-in movement. I went down to the local NAACP office to volunteer and I saw all of these complaints that had come in from poor black people all over Georgia, that no lawyer could respond to because they didn't have the money and there weren't enough lawyers. And I asked myself, what in the world am I doing thinking about, as I was at the time, going to study 19th Century Russian Literature. I didn't want to teach. I wanted to stay in the South. And although I absolutely hated law school and hate the law, it was clear that what was needed was lawyers” - EotP

Though Wright found the study of law dull, she was excited to be at Yale, the epicenter of the northern student civil rights movement. After graduating in 1963, her dedication to political activism led her to Mississippi, a notoriously violent hotbed of racial strife. She went to work in



the NAACP Legal Defense Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi, becoming the first black woman to practice law in the state.

The young activist was stricken by the profound poverty she encountered in the Delta. At the same time. Though alleviating poverty was not Wright's only cause, it was the one that demanded the greatest urgency. By the mid-sixties, she had become well-known as an advocate of Mississippi's poor.

In March 1967, Wright testified in Washington before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty.

Employing her hallmark articulate and analytic argumentation, she persuaded the committee members to visit Mississippi and witness its dire condition.

The committee heard testimonials from poor Mississippians who spoke from personal experience of the destitution Marian Wright had attested to in Washington. The senators were appalled by the degree of privation that continued to exist in Mississippi despite the nation's wealth and strength. After returning to Washington, the committee helped push through legislation that introduced free food stamps and expanded programs providing free meals at school. Senator Kennedy, especially, became a vocal proponent of child welfare services.

By the end of the year, Wright faced a major hurdle.

"The promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam, making the poor—black and white—bear the burdens of war" – MLK

In the wake of the Tet Offensive, America's eyes were on the conflict in Vietnam, and the issue of hunger at home was quickly crowded off the headlines.

"I mean this was a period, ah, of White reaction and backlash. It was a period when the war was becoming a much more divisive force where, ah, the problems of Black and poor people were being left behind and people thought they were annoyances" – EotP interview

The Tet Offensive proved to be an omen of further shocking and painful events to come.

On April 3, 1968, Wright's friend and fellow advocate for the poor, Martin Luther King, Jr, was slain by sniper fire. Just two months later, Robert Kennedy, too, was assassinated.



Though devastated by their deaths, Wright Edelman's resolve to carry on their work was bolstered. America's poor had lost two of their strongest allies. Now it was up to her to be their champion.

"The movement simply took new forms after 1968. The advocacy that I'm doing today on behalf of children is a direct result of what went on in the late '60s. But it was very clear that we had to develop new strategies, new ways of framing issues, new ways of tapping into the broader self-interest, ah, so that whites would perceive it as their self-interest. As always it has been in their self-interest to deal with issues of race and class and so we began to talk about children rather than poor adults and to talk about prevention and to show the ways in which the deprivations that Black and poor children face also affect middle class and, and non-poor children and White children. And so we were creating, setting out on a long path of building a new highway to the future and to create a new politics for change that would have new names and hopefully a broader constituency."

In 1973, seeking a more focused and effective way to convince the government to invest in the poor, Wright Edelman founded the Children's Defense Fund, the first lobby dedicated to children.

The CDF, an advocacy and research center for children's issues, investigates consequences of, and solutions to, childhood poverty. A natural outgrowth of Wright Edelman's propensity for statistical analysis, the CDF produces research showing practical, economic reasons for supporting welfare programs for poor children. CDF's data-driven, child-focused slant has proven powerful.

The Children's Defense Fund is the leading child advocacy organization in the country, and a driving force behind improving child welfare policy. As its founder and leader, Marian Wright Edelman has been a powerful advocate for children for over 40 years.

The many laws and programs Wright Edelman successfully fought for through the Children's Defense Fund include an anti-discrimination act for handicapped children, a bill for childcare and expanded tax credits for low-income families, expansion of free school meal programs, expansion of anti-teen pregnancy programs in high schools, an act increasing welfare benefits for low-income families with children, the Family and Medical Leave Act, increased funds for the free immunization of uninsured children, and the Head Start program.



Marian Wright Edelman works to ensure that important children’s programs stay consistently funded even when views on public spending trend conservative. It takes tireless, dogged dedication, not only to move policy forward, but just to keep existing children’s programs funded and fairly implemented.

“She has changed the future for millions of America’s children by grassroots actions and successful lobbying in Congress. For healthcare, child care, education, and so much more, Marian’s voice is always strong and true.”

“People often ask me, how do you keep doing this year after year, and why did you ever choose to do this? I say it never occurred to me not to do it, and it wouldn’t occur to me to give up.”



Credits

South Carolina Social Studies Standard Correlations were provided by Lisa Ray

The purpose of the [South Carolina Hall of Fame](#) is to recognize and honor both contemporary and past citizens who have made outstanding contributions to South Carolina's heritage and progress.

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