

New Directions

Volume 17 | Issue 3

Article 5

7-1-1990

COMMENCEMENT '90: A Historic Occasion: Beating the Odds

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Recommended Citation

Edelman, Marian Wright (1990) "COMMENCEMENT '90: A Historic Occasion: Beating the Odds," *New Directions*: Vol. 17: Iss. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol17/iss3/5>

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COMMENTARY

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Message to the Class of '90

By Marian Wright Edelman

It's a great honor to share this commencement at this historic place of learning with your new president, Dr. Franklyn Jenifer, your trustees, administrators, faculty, and most of all, with you the graduates of 1990 and your families.

I am always renewed by the great historical legacy we share on these grounds where Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays, Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, Charles Drew, James Nabrit, Thurgood Marshall, Ernest Just, Montague Cobb, Kenneth Clark, Toni Morrison, Jessye Norman, Andrew Young, LaSalle Leffall, [L.] Douglas Wilder, David Dinkins, and countless other Black men and women walked and beat the odds to overcome slavery and segregation in order to pave the way for you to sit here today.

I applaud your great individual accomplishments but I want to remind you that you did not get here alone. You got here on the sweat and toil and prayers and dreams and sacrifice and caring of your families and friends and forebears, some of whose names you'll never know. And you are going to have to sweat and toil and pray and help to get the next generation of Black children where you are today.

I personally know some among you who have overcome odds to graduate today that no number can capture, including physical and emotional abuse, the death of a child



and spouse, drugs, homelessness, welfare and lack of a support system. And I'm proud that you have done what Black folk have always had to do: turned crisis into opportunity and made a way out of no way. You have so much to offer so many of our young people—white and Black—who are unable to handle life in hard places and who lack strong anchors to steady them in the choppy waters of 1990 America. We have not taught them the difference between substance and shadow or provided them clear compasses for navigating the morally polluted sea they must cross to adulthood.

When I was growing up in Bennettsville, S.C., service was as essential a part of my upbringing as eating and sleeping and going to school. Caring Black adults were buffers against the segregated prison of the outside world that told Black children we weren't important. But we didn't believe it because our parents said it wasn't so. Our teachers said it wasn't so. And our preachers said it wasn't so. The clear childhood message I internalized was that as God's child, no man or woman could look down on me and I could look down on no man or woman.

We couldn't play in public playgrounds or sit at drugstore lunch counters which were segregated so my daddy, a Baptist minister, built a playground and canteen behind the church. Whenever he saw a need, he tried to respond. There were no Black homes for the aged so my parents began one across the street and our whole family helped out. I didn't like it a lot at the time, but that's how I learned it was my responsibility to take care of elderly family members and neighbors and

The standard of success for too many Americans has become personal greed rather than common good and building community.

that everyone was my neighbor.

I went everywhere with my parents and members of the congregation and community who were my watchful extended parents. They reported on me when I did wrong and applauded when I did well. Doing well meant being helpful and considerate towards others, doing well in school, and reading. The only time our father wouldn't give us a chore was when we were reading. So I read a lot!

Children were taught that nothing was too lowly to do and that the work of our heads and hands were both valuable. I remember my parents' debate about whether I was too young to go with an older brother to help clean the bed and bedsores of a poor, sick woman. I went and learned just how much even the smallest helping hands can mean to a lonely person in need.

Black adults in our families, churches, and community made children feel valued and important. They spent time with and paid attention to us and struggled to keep us busy. And while life was often hard

and resources scarce, we always knew who we were and that the measure of our worth was inside our heads and hearts and not outside in material possessions or personal ambition. Like the writer Walker Percy, my elders instinctively knew that you could get all A's and still flunk life. I was taught that the world had a lot of problems; that Black people had an extra lot of problems, but that I was able and obligated to struggle and change them; and that extra intellectual and material gifts brought with them the privilege and responsibility of sharing with others less fortunate. In sum, service is the rent each of us pays for living—the very purpose of life and not something to do in your spare time or after you have reached your personal goals.

I'm grateful for these childhood legacies of a living faith reflected in daily service; the discipline of hard work and stick-to-it-ness; and a capacity to struggle in the face of adversity. Giving up and burnout were not part of the language of my elders—you got up every morning and did what you had to do and you got up every time you fell down and tried as many times as you had to until you got it done right. They had grit. They valued family life, family rituals, and they tried to be and to expose us to good role models. And role models were of two kinds: those who achieved in the outside world, like namesake Marian Anderson, and those who lacked education and money but who taught us by the special grace of their lives Christ's and Gandhi's and Heschel's message that the Kingdom of God is within. And I still hope I can be half as good as those ordinary people of

grace who were kind and patient with children and who shared whatever they had with others.

I was 14 years old the night my daddy died. He had holes in his shoes but two children out of college, one in college, another in divinity school, and a vision he was able to convey to me even in an ambulance as he was dying that I, a young Black girl, could be and do anything; that race and gender are shadows, and that character, determination, attitude, and service are the substance of life.

Our children are growing up now in an ethically polluted nation where substance is being sacrificed daily for shadow. Instant sex without consequence and responsibility, instant gratification without effort, instant solutions without sacrifice, getting rather than giving, and hoarding rather than sharing are the too-frequent signals of our mass media, popular culture, and political life.

The standard of success for too many Americans has become personal greed rather than common good and building community. The standard for striving and achievement has become getting by rather than making an extra effort or service to others.

Today we are on the verge of losing two generations of Black children and youth to drugs, violence, too-early parenthood, poor health and education, unemployment, family disintegration—and the spiritual and physical poverty that both breeds and is bred by them.

□ Every 30 seconds of the school day, a Black child drops out.

□ Every 79 seconds, an unmarried Black woman has a baby. More than 62 percent of our babies are being born to unmarried women which almost guarantees the poverty of the majority of the next generation of Black children.

□ Every 3 minutes and 38 seconds, a Black teenager has a baby. The District of Columbia ranks 42nd in the percent of babies born to teens. Five out of six young Black female-headed families are poor.

□ Every 6 1/2 minutes, a low birth-weight Black baby is born. The District of Columbia ranks last in the percent of babies born at low birthweight.

□ Every 46 minutes, a Black baby dies. The District of Columbia has the highest infant mortality rate in the nation.

The odds against Black children worsened between 1980 and 1988.

□ Every 70 minutes, a Black male is murdered. In the first 114 days of this year, there were 145 homicides in the District of Columbia.

□ The number of young Black men under the control of the criminal justice system—609,690—was greater than the total number of Black men of all ages in college—426,000 in 1986.

□ In 1987, there were 7,126 Black males in prison or jail in the District of Columbia. If these men had not been imprisoned, we could have expected 600 of them to have graduated from college; 10 of them to have become physicians; 19 of them to have become lawyers; and 76 of them to have become teachers.

How many more potential Martin Kings, Colin Powells, and Frederick Gregorays is our nation going to waste before it wakes up and recognizes that its ability to compete in the new century is as inextricably intertwined

with its poor and minority children as with its white and affluent ones? The odds against educational and professional success are stacked mightily against Black children whose minds and talents our country desperately needs as the child population decreases and as the proportion of minority and poor children increases.

□ A Black boy today has a 1 in 4,000 chance of getting a Ph.D. in math, engineering, or physics; a 1 in 684 chance of becoming a physician; a 1 in 372 chance of becoming a lawyer; a 1 in 94 chance of becoming a teacher. But that same Black boy has a 1 in 45 chance of becoming a cocaine abuser; a 1 in 24 chance of being imprisoned in his 20s; a 1 in 4 chance of dropping out of school and a 2 in 5 chance of becoming an alcohol abuser.

□ And don't for a moment think professional sports provide better options. A Black boy today has less than a 1 in 8,000 chance of becoming an NBA player and less than a 1 in 10,000 chance of becoming a major league baseball player.

□ A Black girl today has less than a 1 in 21,000 chance of receiving a Ph.D. in mathematics, engineering, or the physical sciences; a 1 in 891 chance of becoming a physician; a 1 in 372 chance of becoming a lawyer and a 1 in 94 chance of becoming a teacher. But that same Black girl has a 1 in 21 chance of being the victim of a violent crime during her teen years; a 1 in 5 chance of dropping out of school before high school graduation and a 2 in 5 chance of having a child before she reaches her 20th birthday.

The odds against Black children worsened between 1980 and 1988. Black family income, after adjusting for inflation, was lower; the Black-white infant mortality ratio was higher, and the proportion of young Black college graduates declined. A baby born in Ward 8 in Washington, D.C.

has less of a chance of living to his/her first birthday than a baby born in Panama, Albania, or Malaysia, and less than half the chance of a baby born in Poland or Cuba. A baby born in Ward 1, where Howard is located, has less of a chance of surviving the first year of life than a baby born in Trinidad and Tobago, Chile, or Jamaica. And if all of these odds stacked against Black babies weren't staggering enough, they face the new plagues of crack and AIDS.

If we do not rise up as a people to fight this community suicide and despair, we are going to lose everything we and our forebears have struggled for during our long sojourn in America.

□ Blacks are almost 4 times as likely as whites to frequently use cocaine, and two and one-half times as likely to have used crack.

□ Half of all Black youth jailed in 1987 were regular drug users. Most of the 25 percent increase in the young Black male death rate between 1985 and 1988 is attributed to drug-related crimes.

□ Two-thirds of all pediatric AIDS among Black children is related to intravenous drug use by the mother or father.

□ HIV has become the 9th leading cause of death among one- to four-year-olds, the majority of whom are Black or Hispanic children. Nearly 6 out of 10 cases of AIDS among Black women stem from drug use.

Go over to the Howard University Hospital neonatal intensive care unit and boarder baby wards and see the tragic consequences of these drug and AIDS tragedies. Howard Hospital averages 16 boarder babies a week at a weekly cost of \$8,400 and an annual cost of about \$7 million in 1989 in largely uncompensated care. But the money is the least of it. The human suffering and the breakdown of our families and sense of community reflected in these tiny abandoned

human beings is what we must face up to today and tomorrow together as a people and as a nation.

Some of you with your diplomas today may ask what these facts have to do with you. You've beat the odds so why can't they do it too? My response is that the crisis of our children and families affects every Black person and every American

Each Black adult has the opportunity to help create a new climate of hope and "can do" among our children...

because the top cannot rise without the bottom. The American work force of the future depends as much on our Black and poor as well as white and rich children.

The future Black voting and economic base, upon which much of your middle-class leadership status rests, resides in the strength of the Black family and child and of the entire Black community. Disappearing Black males affect family formation across all classes in our community, increasing the growth of single parent households and Black child poverty. And it is not just poor Black women looking for educated and employed men. All of our daughters are lonely and scared about whether they are going to be able to get married, have children and carry on the strong Black tradition of family and community. Among Black young adults in 1987, for every 100 Black women who graduated from college, only 66 Black men graduated. In 1988, for every 100 Black women who were enrolled in college, only 64 Black men were enrolled.

This is SOS time for Black folk as we face the greatest crisis in our community since slavery. And the enemy is not just racism and poverty and misguided national investment priorities, but also abandonment of responsibility for ourselves, for each other, and for our children.

Racism has been a given cross we have had to bear throughout our Black sojourn in America. And let's bear and overcome it as we've always done. No white person should use my facts about the tragic breakdown of Black families to point fingers at Blacks or think that it is just Black children who are in trouble. More white than Black children are poor and in need of help although Black children suffer disproportionately. Millions of white children are abused, neglected, teen parents, drug abusers and adrift. Whites must confront their own family breakdown and child crisis as urgently as we must confront ours. But the bottom line for us is that we can't let what white folk may think or say get in the way of what Black folk must do for ourselves and for our children. White folks did not create us—God did. Our values are not dependent on what white folks value; our special struggles have given us special strengths and insights which we must use to transform rather than copy the worst of American culture.

Each of us can open our eyes and ears and hearts and see and hear and respond to the suffering of Black children all around us. Each of us must help jumpstart the Black community and the nation to action to save Black children—and all children—and to replace the current climate of despair with one of hope and struggle. We need to stop the handwringing and start the working.

The hard-earned progress of the Black community is being undermined by national and community inattention and by the loss of communication, caring, and mutual striving between the Black middle class and indigenous communities.

Each Black adult has the opportunity to help create a new climate of hope and "can do" among our children by extending a brass ring of achievement and service for Black

children to grab as the strong Black men and women of my childhood and college years did for so many.

Black children desperately need us to believe in them, to connect with them, to be there for them, to struggle with them, to be good examples for them, and to convince them that life is worth living and the future is worth struggling for. Each one of us must pledge today to start reaching out to them by giving a few hours a week as extended families to tutor, mentor, counsel, and to lobby for supports they need. It is disgraceful that Black children are faring better in Mississippi than in the District of Columbia on some key indicators.

What Can We Do To Help?

It is the responsibility of every Black adult—parent, teacher, preacher, and professional—to make sure that Black children hear what we have learned from the lessons of life and to hear over and over that we love them and that they are not alone. Too many of us have been so busy today making sure our children had all the things we didn't have that we have not given them the things we did have that enabled us to survive and succeed. So I want to share a few lessons with you today to take along as you leave this place. At Howard, you got your lessons from your teachers first and then got examined on how well you had learned them. In life the test and consequences come before the lessons.

I. Remember that Black folk can never take anything for granted in America and we had better not start now as racial intolerance resurges all over our land. It may be wrapped up in new euphemisms and better etiquette, but as Frederick Douglass warned us earlier, it's the same old snake. He also reminded us that "men may not get all they pay for in this world, but they must certainly pay for all they get."

Don't think for a moment that you've got it made with your Howard degree and can jive your way up the career ladder. You've got to work your way up—hard and continuously. Don't be lazy. Do your homework.

Commencement '90

A Historic Occasion



Marion Wright Edelman

At the university's 122nd Commencement on May 12, the Class of 1990 was witness to a new chapter in Howard University's contemporary history. The occasion marked Franklyn G. Jenifer's debut in presiding over the traditional ceremony. He did so before approximately 2,000 graduates, their families, friends and teachers, who packed the upper quadrangle of the main campus on an unseasonably cold day.

Jenifer, who came on board as Howard's 14th president the first of April, is the first graduate of the university to hold its top post.

In his welcome, he said:

It is with great hope and pride, and with justified confidence in their capabilities, that we send forth from this beautiful and hallowed campus some 2,000 of the best and brightest young women and men of America. They will join the ranks of the many thousands of Howard graduates who have distinguished themselves in serving our people, our nation, and the world at large. Their future may be challenging, and marred occasionally with a setback or a need to overcome a traditional barrier or two. But they can move into that future with confidence, certain that the years of struggle and sacrifice that have brought them to this point of success have in the process also strengthened them, armed them with virtue and character, and given them the ability to create a future of their own that is bright and rewarding.

For those of us who remain here, the future is charged with the opportunity and the challenge to take this great institution into the 21st century. We are faced with the challenge to do it in such a manner that, having built upon its illustrious past, and having relieved it of any impediment to unexcelled greatness, it will stand indisputably in that century as a university of the first rank, a research-oriented national resource at the cusp of new knowledge in both the natural and social

science, and in the arts. It is to this end that I shall dedicate all my energy, and whatever God-given talents and skills that I may possess. In turn, I ask that each of you, trustees, students, faculty, alumni, parents and staff, work with me to make this noble dream a reality. . .

Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, whose "Message to the Class of '90" appears on page 0 delivered the commencement address and also received an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. Also honored were David Blackwell, professor of mathematics and statistics at the University of California, Berkeley; Rep. William L. Clay (D-Mo.); and Ivan E. Taylor, retired English professor and department chairman at Howard.

Marian Wright Edelman

Edelman has been president of the Children's Defense Fund since 1973. Prior to that, the nationally-recognized children's advocate had been director of the Center for Law and Education at Harvard University and field foundation fellow and partner with the Washington Research Project of the Southern Center for Public Policy, a public interest law firm and the parent body of the Children's Defense Fund.

She is the recipient of numerous honors and awards, has traveled extensively, holds board memberships with a number of organizations and is the principal author of such books as *Families in Peril: An Agenda for Social Change*, *Portrait of Inequality: Black and White Children in America* and *School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children?*

A South Carolina native, Edelman earned a law degree from the Yale Law School and a baccalaureate from Spelman College.

David Blackwell

Blackwell, who began teaching at the University of California at Berkeley in 1954,



David Blackwell



William L. Clay



Ivan E. Taylor

received an honorary Doctor of Science degree.

He has been professor of mathematics and statistics at the Berkeley campus since 1973, and has been a faculty research lecturer, chairman of the department of statistics as well as a professor of statistics. He also has been director of the University of California Study Center, the Education Abroad Program for the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Blackwell had been a professor at Howard from 1944 to 1954, where he headed the mathematics department from 1947 until his departure to California.

An Illinois native, Blackwell holds a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Illinois at Urbana, and has a long list of publications to his credit.

William L. Clay

Clay, who has been a member of the U.S. House of Representatives since 1968, received the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

He represents the 1st Congressional District of Missouri and serves as chairman of the Subcommittee on Labor Management Relations and Pension Reform Activities of the House Education and Labor Committee. He is also chairman of the Libraries and Memorials Subcommittee of the House Administration Committee, and a ranking member of the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee.

A member of the board of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Clay began his political career in 1959 when he was elected to the Board of Alderman in his native St. Louis.

Ivan E. Taylor

Taylor, who served for 33 years at Howard as professor and chairman of the department of English, assistant dean of the College of Liberal Arts, and director of the

Graduate Expository Writing Program until he retired in 1978, received the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. (It was accepted by his wife, Estelle W. Taylor, the current director of Howard's Graduate Expository Writing Program.)

Born in 1904 in Jamaica, Ivan Taylor received his high school education in New York City, graduating from DeWitt Clinton High School in 1926. He then took evening classes at the College of the City of New York for two years before enrolling at Howard in 1927. He graduated from Howard in 1930 with a B.A. degree and subsequently received an M.A. in 1932, majoring in English. In 1943, he earned a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania.

As an undergraduate at Howard, he served as the editor-in-chief of *The Hilltop*, among other extracurricular campus activities.

His many years as a teacher and administrator at Howard started in 1945 when he was appointed associate professor of English. He went on to serve as assistant dean of the College of Liberal Arts in 1949 and as professor of English and chair of the English department from 1947 until 1969.

He is the author of five books and numerous articles in scholarly journals. Also, he is the recipient of numerous awards, honors and recognitions, among them the Graduate Students Award for "fatherly and academic services," 1976, and a University Grant for Foreign Travel and Study in Europe and Great Britain, 1979.

Before returning to Howard to teach, the popular professor, scholar and creative writer had worked in various academic capacities at six historically Black institutions of higher learning. (See Gregory Rigsby's tribute on page 28.) □

Pay attention to detail. Take care and pride in your work. People who are sloppy in little things tend to be sloppy in big things. Be reliable. Stick with something until you finish and resist jumping from pillar to post. Take the initiative in creating your own opportunity and don't wait around for other people to discover you or do you a favor. Don't think you are entitled to anything you don't sweat and struggle for, even if white folk act as if they are entitled—and too many of them do. Don't assume a door is closed; push on it. Don't assume if it was closed yesterday, it's closed today. And don't ever stop learning and improving your mind. If you do, you're going to be left behind.

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II. Remember that forming families is serious business and requires a measure of thoughtful planning and economic stability. In 1989, one in every seven Black families with children under 18 had someone unemployed. Almost half (43 percent) of the Black families hit by unemployment were single parents with no one at work. Among Black married couples with children who were hit by unemployment, only 16 percent had no one else working. Among all Black married couples with children under 18, more than 96 percent had at least one person working full time, despite the much higher unemployment rates among Black adults. Education alone, although of great intrinsic value, cannot guarantee a single young Black adult the income needed to raise children in economic safety today. But two Black adults, both working, have the safety net of the second income when unemployment strikes.

III. Set goals and work quietly and systematically toward them. Too many of us talk big and act small. So often we get bogged down in our ego needs and lose sight of our broader community goals. It's alright to want to feel important as long as it is not at the expense of *doing* important deeds—even if we don't get the credit. You can get a lot achieved in life if you do not mind doing the work and letting other people get the credit. You know what you

do and the Lord knows what you do and that's all that matters.

IV. Sell the shadow for the substance. There's nothing wrong with owning a Mercedes or designer clothes or partying as long as you do not consider them life goals or spend every dime and all the time you have on them. I was watching President Johnson's inaugural ball on television in the 1960s with a Black college president's wife when Mrs. [Fannie Lou] Hamer, that great

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unschooled but very wise lady of the Mississippi civil rights movement, came onto the screen. The college president's wife moaned: "Oh my goodness, there's Miz Hamer at the President's ball and she doesn't even have on a long dress." My response was: "That's alright. Mrs. Hamer with no long gown is there and you and I with our long gowns are not." Get your priorities straight. Dr. King once chided a fraternity audience which boastfully announced that its membership spent \$500,000 for liquor. He said, "A handful of Negroes . . . spent more money in one week for whiskey than all of the 16 million Negroes spent that whole year for the UNCF and for the NAACP. Now that was a tragedy." If any Black social organization still is spending more on alcohol and entertainment than on supporting Black institutions and Black children, it is an even greater tragedy. And let's be clear: tobacco and alcohol are killing more Black people than cocaine.

V. Worry more about your attitude than your aptitude or lineage. It is not what is done to us that matters; but how we take what is done to us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us, Booker T. Washington did not know his father's name, but it did not keep him from becoming a great man. Stay out of the fast lane and watch your company. You didn't have a choice about the parents you inherited, but you do have a choice

Don't confuse social and political charm with real support.

about the kind of parent you will be. Don't let anything keep you from finding the genuine within yourself and seeking to be a decent human being.

VI. Assign yourself. My daddy used to ask us whether the teacher gave us any homework. If we said no, he'd say "well assign yourself." Don't wait around for your professor or your boss or your friend to direct you to do what you are able to figure out and do for yourself. Don't do just as little as you can to get by as so many Americans are doing today in

our political and economic life. If you see a need, don't ask why doesn't somebody do something, ask why don't I do something. Don't wait around to be told what to do. There is nothing more wearing than people who have to be asked or reminded to do things repeatedly. Hard work, initiative, and persistence are the non-magic carpets to success. Let's teach the rest of the country how to achieve again by our example.

VII. Use your political and economic power for the community. Vote. We are currently wasting about half our voting strength. Run for political office. And don't think that you or your reelection are the only point once you win: building strong families and communities is the point of gaining power. Don't let any political candidate have your vote or dollar who is not committed to supporting the child care and health care and education and housing and jobs our children need. Don't confuse social and political charm with real support. It's wonderful to go to the White House or Congress for a chat or a meal but words alone will not meet Black children's needs. Political leadership and different budget priorities will. Speak truth to power and do not take style for substance. And practice what you preach to others. Put your own money behind your own rhetoric about concern for children. Don't spend every dollar you earn. Save a dime and share a dime. Don't be just job seekers. Be job creators.

VIII. Never work just for money. Money alone won't save your soul or build a decent family or help you sleep at night. We are the richest nation on earth with one of the highest incarceration, drug addiction, and child poverty rates in the world. Don't confuse wealth or fame with character. Don't boast to your children about the Rayful Edmonds

[a convicted drug dealer] who destroy children. Boast to them about the [Rev.] Henry Gregorys whose Shiloh Family Life Center at 9th and P [streets in Washington, D.C.] builds the children we need to carry on the best Black traditions. And don't tolerate or condone moral corruption whether it's found in high office or low places or is white, brown or Black. It is not okay to push or use drugs even if every white person in America is doing it. It is not okay to cheat or lie even if every [Michael] Milken and [Ivan] Boesky [both convicted for illegalities in the stock market], [Oliver] North, and [Richard] Secord [both of the Iran-Contra affair] or public official does. Be honest. And demand that those who represent you be honest.

IX. *Don't be afraid of taking risks or of being criticized.* If you don't want to be criticized then do not say anything, do anything, or be anything. Don't be afraid of failing. It's the way you learn to do things right. It doesn't matter how many times you fall down. All that matters is how many times you keep getting up. "It's not failure," Dr. Benjamin Mays called a sin, "it's low aim." And don't wait for everybody to come along to get something done. It's always a few people who get things done and keep things going.

X. *Remember your roots, your history, and the forebears' shoulders on which you stand.* And pass these roots on to your children and to other Black children whose parents may not be able to. Young people who do not know where they come from and the struggle it took to get them where they are now will not know where they are going or what to do for anyone besides themselves if and when they finally get somewhere. Our Black children need the rightful pride of a great people that

produced Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass from slavery and Benjamin Mays and Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer from segregation—people second to none in helping transform America from a theoretical to a more living democracy.

We must build on the strong Black tradition of family and teach our children to delay family formation until

We must join together as an entire community to establish an ethic of achievement and self-esteem. . .

they are economically and emotionally stable and ready to raise the new generation of Black children and leaders. We must strengthen family rituals; prayers if we are religious, and if not, regular family meals and gatherings. We must take an interest in our children's schoolwork and non-school activities and give them constructive alternatives to the street. We must fight together for their attention in the halls of power. We must do things with them and listen to them. Be moral examples for them. If we cut corners, they will too. If we lie, they will too. If we spend all our money on our

backs and wheels and tithe no portion of it for our colleges, churches, and civic causes, they won't either.

We must join together as an entire community to establish an ethic of achievement and self-esteem in poor and middle-class Black children. We must encourage science and math achievement as well as basketball and football; calculus as well as cotillions. Our children must hear from us over and over again what is true: that they can achieve if we expect it of them and fight for the supports they need to achieve.

Pledge today to begin the desperately needed transformation of America within yourself and yours with commitment to saving a child. If every Black church in America took responsibility for seeing that one Black child was adopted we would not have Black children in foster care. My mother took in 12 foster children after her natural children left home. If every Black becomes the voice for poor children in the political process, we'll change the misguided national priorities that neglect the poorest of our children and which will turn America into a second rate power. . . We have the plan at CDF [Children's Defense Fund]. But we cannot do it alone. Call us and help. □

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund, Washington, D.C. The above came from her address at Howard University's 1990 commencement exercises on May 12.