

Smiley & West featuring Marian Wright Edelman

Smiley: From PRI, Public Radio International, in Los Angeles, I'm Tavis Smiley.

West: And from Princeton I'm Cornel West and this is Smiley & West.

Edelman: Poor children should not be subsidizing the education of rich children. But unless the black community voice comes here and begins to lobby about this it's going to keep happening. So the issue is what are we going to be demanding of our president and members of congress?

Smiley: This week long time defender of all children and civil rights legend Marian Wright Edelman.

Smiley: Still to come, we'll celebrate Women's History Month with someone who wrote her own chapter, so we'll call it Women's Her-story Month, her story, the legendary Marian Wright Edelman.

West: Nobody like her. She's been protecting our babies of all colors, especially the poor babies, for almost four decades as the founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund. We'll speak with her next. Stay with us.

INTERVIEW OF MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

West: From PRI, Public Radio International in Princeton, I'm Cornel West.

Smiley: And in Los Angeles I'm Tavis Smiley.

West: And you know, Brother Tavis, when you talk about the least of these, when you talk about the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer, there's only one person who is alive in America who has that kind of prophetic gravitas, and that is our dear sister Marian Wright

Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, which is approaching its 40th anniversary.

Can you imagine that?

Smiley: Forty years of loving and serving these kids.

West: Sister Marian's been at it for 40 years strong as ever, fire in her soul, sharpness of intelligence in her mind.

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Sister Marian Wright Edelman, welcome to Smiley & West. You can see we are fired up to have you on the show.

Edelman: Well I'm happy to be here with you.

Smiley: We are delighted to have you. Let me start by saying congratulations on this approaching 40th anniversary.

In your own words tell me about this four decade journey. We know you ain't tired yet and you're still going to keep on running and see what the end's going to be as the old gospel song says. But tell me so far about this almost 40 year journey.

Edelman: Well I hope we're going to get out of Egypt and cross the Jordan and build the Promised Land.

West: We been stuck in Egypt a long time.

Edelman: We been stuck in Egypt a long time. But we've got to get to that Promised Land.

But you know, I thought I would have been out of business by now, because I thought if we told folk the truth about the suffering of children, told them how it was going to save money to invest in them preventively until waiting until they got into trouble or got pregnant or had family breakdown, that we would do what is common sense and the decent thing in a democracy and in our particular society.

It's hard work and we're more busy than we've ever been. And in many ways we face new threats that are as serious as the ones when we started.

Smiley: Speaking of new threats, let me ask this first, because I'm anxious to get your take. I've had my comments on it, Doc has had his comments. I believe that budgets are moral documents; that budgets are moral documents. President Obama put his budget out. We've seen his. The Republicans have responded. Take either one of them, take both of them and tell me what's at stake for children and what you see in the president's budget or the Republicans budget as it relates to our babies.

Edelman: Well I'll tell you... let me just take the easy one, because the Republicans budget is an abomination. It's got nothing to do with saving money or decreasing deficits. It's an ideological statement of just tear it all down, undermine the president and just take us back 50 years, so I don't even want to comment. It's beyond thinking and we better wake up.

The president's budget, you know, and both of those budgets if we're serious about deficits, we've got to do three things. We've got tax increases for billionaires and millionaires. Secondly, we need to stop all the corporate subsidies that they don't need and that can go into things that we do have to have for our children and families.

And third, we've got to deal with the defense budget. And while the administration has come in with some cuts in the defense budget, there are many more cuts that need to be made and we need to use Martin Luther King's vision that we're not going to go the wrong way to deal with excessive militarism, excessive visualism, excessive... you know, the poverty. And poverty has got to be on the agenda.

We've got to talk about how we can grow up as a nation and not try to keep having our cake and eat it too. And we've got to address the growing gap between rich and poor which is at the highest ever recorded. And we've got to understand that if we want to decrease deficits we need to invest in our children. Because every year we have 14, we now have 15.5 million children in poverty. That's the most we've had since 1959. When Dr. King died calling for a poor people's campaign we had 11 million poor children. And our GDP, even though we're in this economic downturn, is three times bigger than it was then.

But every year we let this happen we're losing a half trillion dollars in foregone productivity. Every time we let children drop out of school, and we've got 40 percent of our black children and 20 percent of all of our children drop out of school we're losing another half trillion dollars in productivity. We're stupid and we've got to face up to the things that are going to make us strong. And our biggest national security problem is not from any external enemy, it's from inside.

And our failure to have our children learn how to read and write, a majority of all children in all racial and income groups in our public schools cannot read or compute at grade level in 4th, 8th or 12th grade. And over 80 percent of black and Latino children who are going to constitute the majority of our child population by 2023 cannot read or compute at grade level in 4th, 8th or 12th grade. What is a child going to do if they can't read in this globalizing economy? They're being sentenced to social death. They're being shunted off into a cradle of prison pipeline. And the black community needs to be up in arms. But the country needs to understand that this is their economic as well as moral Achilles heel.

West: You and I were at the National Urban League celebrating the 100th anniversary of that grand institution and grand movement. And we were reflecting on the relative character of progressive leadership in general, black leadership in particular, and to the degree to which it's almost been AWOL when it comes to the plight and predicament of poor brothers and sisters of all colors under 15, 12 years old.

How do you account for that massive indifference? And this is true in the Democratic Party, it's true in the Republican Party and it's true for a lot of the leadership outside of the party.

Edelman: Well I have a hard time figuring it out. But I can't agree with you more, that we are black adults... these are problems of the bigger society. But we were never like that bigger society. And we didn't need to throw out our spiritual baby in the bath water of American materialism. And we have adopted all the trappings, those of us who could move into this new house without remembering who it was and what we had to bring to it.

As Dr. King said, we didn't want to integrate into a burning house. And we really needed to bring our own values. And integration didn't mean not being who you were, it was being who you were and sharing that and bringing the better parts of what you could offer.

But what we've got now is a whole lot of... the folk who are able to walk through the door have forgotten about communities. And there's a lot of individual success to celebrate. And there's a lot to be proud of. And all these black elected officials and in people who are walking... the doors of, going through the doors of corporate power and those who are in positions of power. But you know, the bottom is going backwards.

Majority of black children who are poor and didn't have the ability to walk through and get good educations like we did are going to not do as well as their parents did. And the whole Civil Rights Movement was about making the world better for your children. Making sure they had a better life than you had. And we have just gone off and taken care of ourselves.

But you know Dr. Hart used to say that the bottom can't... the top can't stay up there if the bottom is getting bigger and bigger. It's going to pull us all down. And there is still this badge of color and we've got to begin to talk about how we put our children first.

Middle class black children are not exempt from a lot of this. The police doesn't pay any attention when they are racially profiling and picking you up. You try and get a taxi in New York, we're all still going to be badged together because we have this common bond of color.

But we are forgetting our heritage. And as we forget our heritage we are going to lose our future. And you cannot have two-thirds of your children who are suffering from extreme poverty, incarceration, illiteracy. We've got to wake up and we've got to sort of regain our bearing as a black community.

Racial disparities and poverty still afflict millions of black children and they are the force behind the cradle to prison pipeline. It puts at risk a boy born, a black boy born in 2001 one in three risk of going to prison in his lifetime. And mass incarceration is one of the biggest threats.

Michelle Alexander in her fine new book calls it *The New Jim Crow*. I call it the new apartheid, it may well be slavery. But we've got to deal with these racial disparities.

Black children, many of them by the millions never get on the trajectory toward success. They're born twice, they're three times as likely to be born poorer than white children. They're more than three times as likely to live in extreme poverty, which has been growing, and therefore we've got to deal with jobs and with economic development and with good education investments. They are the poorest group of children, if you're a black child under 5.

Over 70 percent of our babies are being born to non-married mothers in the female-headed family without an educated head is the poorest in the nation. And again, that is growing and we've got to address it.

Our children are many more times likely to live in a single parent family without the father in the home and we've been having a lot of discussion about that. But we need to talk about the structural problems that make marriage difficult. Benjamin Franklin said a long time ago the job is the

best family policy you can have. And I'm going to come back to the structural changes in our economy because there's no work there.

And boy, if you don't have an education there is no work there in the future. That's why we've got unemployment rates among our black young men and the under utilization of young black men that rivals 43 percent. And if you are dropping out of school, I tell you, you are being sentenced to the underground economy and you're going to likely end up in prison. And so our children have less economic hope in many ways than they had when you and I were growing up.

West: You see how warped our priorities are. When King called for a revolution in priorities that's precisely what he meant. In the eyes of so many of us Sister Marian, you are the grand figure keeping alive the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. directly connected to him given your work there in Mississippi after you went to Spelman, spent that wonderful time with Howard Zinn, went on to Yale Law.

Now we know that there's a bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Oval Office. Have you been in direct conversation with our beloved president given your status and stature in the legacy of Martin King?

Edelman: Well I have been in conversation and I certainly know what the Children's Defense Fund stands for over there. We're in and out of there talking to everybody. We're yelling, but we need help. We cannot be there by ourselves. The Tea Party people have been to Washington. All the people who want to make money off of our children, the textbook preparers, the textbook salesmen and the test preparers are all here. We've got to get the black folk coming to Washington to say we want to make sure that Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Brother, we need to get that No Child Left Behind Act changed. You know that stole our trademarked mission, leave no child behind.

West: Yeah, I know.

Edelman: And gave it the worst brand. But I want it to be Title I again of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. But it is still an engine of inequality because the children who are getting the least, those in areas of concentrated poverty where again rural and poor and black children tend to be impacted, they're the least well served by the formula. CDF is trying to change the formula. Nobody wants to hear us about that, but we're going to have to do it and keep talking about it until we get it changed, because poor children should not be subsidizing the education of rich children.

Again, unless the black community voice comes here and begins to lobby about this it's going to keep happening. So the issue is what are we going to be demanding of our president and members of Congress.

West: We've got to put pressure on it.

Edelman: We've to put pressure on it.

West: Got to put pressure on it.

Edelman: There are no politicians... you've got to put pressure on them. There are no friends in politics. We'll get what we demand. And we've got to begin to demand fair treatment for our children.

That's what we're trying to do in the second phase of the black community crusade for children. Say come on back here.

West: But how do you negotiate this very treacherous terrain that Brother Tavis and I have to work with where in being critical of the president many black brothers and sisters see us as being personal in our attack rather than principle in our concern about poor children and poor people of all colors? We are going to be relentless in keeping alive the legacy of King and Marian Wright Edelman and others no matter what.

But how have you been able to work through that terrain, because we don't have the kind of outcry in black America with a black president. And we know that there's a reticence among many black brothers and sisters to

really speak the truth when it comes to suffering because we have a black president. How do you deal with that?

Edelman: Well I deal with it by sort of saying what I already said to everybody. And I don't care whether they're white, black or brown. If poor children are poor, if poor children are not getting an education, if they're getting their money for their livelihood the chances of their survival stolen, if our policies are bad I don't care whether the perpetrators are white, black or Latino. The issue is about children. It's about values.

Secondly, there are a lot of people who think that now that we've got a black president in the White House is that all of our problems are going to be taken care of. We're always looking for that charismatic leader who is going to take on our burdens and solve all of our problems. They'll get what we demand.

And third, the president is not helped by our silence. He's helped by our voice and giving him room as he hears from all these people in power. And the Tea Partiers and the republicans and all the other others, unless there's a counterforce he's not going to be able to be as good as he is.

Now I think he did pretty good in his first budget in terms of investing in education and in early childhood education and expanding tax credits. Now I'm somebody who believes in watching what people do, not so much what they say. And while he talks a lot about the middle class, if you look at the budget on its expansion of child tax credits, earned income tax credits, the amount that was invested in neighborhood-based comprehensive services, the promised neighborhoods have a new \$150 million in his budget. It's the largest budget investment in education we've had.

If the new budget has money in there for Head Start, significant increases for childcare, it's got some big gaps. There's not stuff in there on jobs. There are children who have never seen anybody work and who don't have any hope of work.

I come from a rural county in South Carolina. A preacher called me up a couple of weeks ago to tell me about... a couple months ago to tell me about three young black boys in my home county, 30,000, unemployment rate holding between 16 and 20 percent. And he asked the first boy what he wanted to be when he grew up. And he said I want to work at McDonald's.

The second boy when they asked what he wanted to be when he grew up he said I want to be Spiderman. And when he pushed him for a real life character that he wanted to emulate he couldn't think of one because he's never seen anybody working.

West: My gosh, my gosh.

Edelman: And the third little boy drew something on the ground. And he said that's me. I don't have to worry about what I'm going to be when I grow up because I'm going to be dead.

Now you know, this is not Dr. King's dream. This is a hopelessness and a nihilism that we black adults have got to wake up. The churches have got to wake up, open them doors, have freedom schools in there and compete with the drug and the gang dealers. We have got to begin to reweave our families and our community.

Go ahead. No, because I'm on a tear. Go ahead.

Smiley: No, I'm glad. That's why we wanted you on, though, putting the truth out there.

Let me ask, and you and Doc... Doc's slightly older than me and you're older than me. Maybe I'm missing something here, but what has made us so complacent? Harry Belafonte, a friend of all of ours on this program right now, and I had a long conversation one night on whether or not the baton was passed improperly or whether or not we, our generation, dropped the baton. Wherever you stand in that debate, how did we as a people, to the point you're making so brilliantly now where our children are concerned, how did we become as a community so complacent?

Edelman: Well, that's a good question. But we've got a lot of things that lulled us into oblivion, like drugs and alcohol and materialism and cars. If you look at all of our \$700 billion purchasing power, we're spending \$300 million on books and magazines and we're spending \$12 billion or something like that on shoes. We bought into the wrong set of priorities. And we became selfish. We thought if we went through the door that we didn't have to worry those folk who couldn't get through the door. That's one of the things.

Secondly, there's been a warp, a time warp in the transition to a new kind of leadership. When Dr. King died he was making a transition to a cross-racial movement to end poverty. And the poor people's campaign really was a watershed... the Civil Rights leadership hasn't caught up to the economic social things in the way in which I think it was anticipated. But CDF came out of that.

It was pretty clear even in Mississippi that they didn't like things called poor black adults. We thought if you can sort of talk about children as a prevention route, as a way to save money and as a way to show that more white children weren't harmed than black children but we never lost sight of the black and Latino and disabled and vulnerable children at the bottom who didn't have a constituency, that that was the beginning way of building a new road to a new highway.

And that if you can sort of make the case that babies without belts to tighten and to compete were not guilty of things that we always accused lazy or unworthy adults of that this was the way to go.

I think we've made some real progress in that way. We've got a framework of laws on the book, 20, 25, and I'm very proud of over the last 35 years. But boy, do we have a long way to go.

But we always ask two questions. How does a policy or an absence of policy affect all children? And then how does it affect those children most at the bottom? So most of our witnesses for welfare were white mothers when we

first did it. We talked about the fact that it was working people who were suffering.

But teenage pregnancy, drugs, violence affects black kids disproportionately, but again it affects many more white kids. And there are more poor white children than poor Latino and black children. So we've tried to appeal to self-interest as well as to decency and to build specific issue coalitions to move specific things along.

But it's been a very lonely battle. But we keep trying to reach across race and class. But our base is in the black community with the black churches, with the black women and with black young people. And out of the first black community crusade for children we didn't make a whole lot of noise, we didn't talk to a lot of folk. We tried to develop community based models because most social change is planting seeds and cultivating them and waiting and watering them and fertilizing them until they can grow.

Brother Cornel, because you've been involved in that first one I'm really proud of the fact that 90,000 children have gone through Freedom Schools, these literacy based programs, empowerment programs. Many of them have finished college. They're coming back to go into teaching. They're teaching us and they're training the next generation. We've trained 9000 college students and there again, becoming a new leadership core. We have trained about 20,000 other young people who are that next generation.

Because one of the things that happened that we have been devoted to when I was growing up is that we were mentored and trained and people spent time with us. Dr. King spent time. Medgar Evers picked me up as a first year law student. Took me home to meet Myrlie the first time and have dinner with his children the first time. I had been in law school 3 months. Picked me up at the airport. And then drove me 90 miles up to Greenwood, Mississippi to meet my snick friends.

We don't do that with our young people anymore. And I know how I was mentored and nurtured. And we have that same obligation to give back.

And I tell you, I'm kind of excited about these young people who have come through the last 20 years of quiet work and leadership development at Haley Farm. And I thank you both for being there. They are professors and lawyers and they're going to do just fine, thank you.

Now we're making this next step to see if we can't train another 5000 young leaders of color, at least half black males, and tell them everything we know. And tell them about the strategies that are going to be needed if we're going to bring about social change in this era. They are learning their history; they are learning about slavery; they are learning we can go back to slavery.

Smiley: Dr. West, I'm curious, Sister Marian just said something that just sent chills down my spine. I'm sure you felt the same way.

West: Yes, yes.

Smiley: That story about Medgar Evers picking her up, taking her to his house. And then driving her 90 miles to meet her snick friends. This is Medgar Evers, an icon in this country. I'm wondering, Doc, your thoughts on this issue that she raises about the lack of mentorship, that not enough of us are reaching back to mentor these young people these days.

West: I just love your foundation focus on the young people. When I think of Medgar Evers, of course we were in Mississippi with Charles Evers as well as Myrlie talking about his legacy. I just think of the caravan of love that Isley Jasper Isley sang about that Medgar Evers loved the people, he loved the young brilliant law student from Yale named Marian Wright.

He knew her father was one of the great preachers. He knew that she loved the people. That love train, that love connection was one that was enacted. It was embodied. It was concretized in praxis. And the fundamental question we have to raise is where is the love for our children? If we had deep love for them we would make them a major priority so that the kind of thing that Sister Marian is talking about would be part of our lives. It would be integral to who we are.

But we shifted. We no longer really want to be free, we just want to be comfortable. And once you want to be comfortable it has to do with just your convenience and contentment. It doesn't have to do with courage. It doesn't have to do with finding joy and serving others and wanting to sacrifice.

Smiley: Let me take your question, though, and ask Sister Marian about this, though. I hear Doc's question, Marian Wright Edelman, where is the love. And here's my response. I don't know an adult anywhere, I don't know a politician anywhere, I don't know any president we've ever had who said they didn't love children.

Edelman: Everybody says they love children.

West: It's lip service.

Edelman: Until they get in the budget rooms.

West: That's right, empty lip service.

Edelman: Lip service. But they cut children every day and don't think about it, because who votes and who gives them money and who gives them media is what determines their vote, unless there is a counterforce. You can try to shame them. And we need to do more to shame them. And we've had our best success when we turn out baby strollers and sic them on them.

But we don't really love our children. And they are not the top of our priority. And many adults are AWOL.

Smiley: Wow, wow, wow, wow.

Edelman: Both in our families and in our churches, in our communities, in our schools. And children are beside the point because adults think about their own convenience, their own systems, their own salaries. And the majority of our black children are in schools where there are a whole lot of black principals and a whole lot of black teachers. And

they're the ones who are telling our kids to shut up and sit down. We need to hold everybody accountable. And we need to sort of reverse our priorities and say we are going to not protect the black future and honor the black struggles in the past unless we step up to the plate and regain our moorings.

We have just lost our moorings about what's important.

West: Lost our moorings. I think, Brother Tavis, you said that budget is a moral document. That's such a profound statement. I think what it says is we love our investment bankers, we love our oligarchs, we love our plutocrats, we love our private enterprises linked to the military industrial complex. But we don't love our poor people. We don't love our poor children. We don't love our workers. We don't love our unions.

We have to be clear about what the priorities are in terms of what our budget looks like, in terms of what we do. Not the empty lip service. Because you keep in mind, no politician will stand up and say I love investment bankers. But when you look at their policies, that's what they're doing.

Smiley: Here's the exit question, Sister Marian in a minute to go here. For those listening for this entire conversation, I know they've been unsettled by, as they should be, unsettled by what you've laid out. There's a lot for us to marinate on, a lot for us to wrestle with. Is there anything for us to be hopeful about?

Edelman: Oh, yeah. We know so much more. We know how to provide a good service to the kids. We have the Harlem Children's Zone that came out of the first black community crusade for children. We know how to run good schools. We just need to make them whole school systems. We know how to do good healthcare.

We need to kind of just get our act together to force our political leaders from the president on down to invest in those things that we know work and to stop making missiles more important than mothers and bombs more

important than babies and to really begin to sort of... you're right, it's a moral document. It's also, it's a basic values document. But it is also a common sense document.

If we keep spending the way we are spending and let the kind of continuing economic coup d'état which has occurred transferring wealth from the poor to the rich we're going to go to hell as Dr. King said in his last sermon titled to his mama on the day he was assassinated is Why American May Go To Hell. If we don't use our vast wealth to help the poor and everybody become a part of this family we are going to go to hell.

West: She is a living legend in her own time. We love her, we respect her. There's simply no one else like her in the country. She is a great freedom fighter. She is the intellectual with New York Times selling books. She's founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman. What a blessing to be in conversation with you.

Wasn't that wonderful, Brother Tavis?

Smiley: Love you, love you, love you. Glad to have you on this program Sister Marian.

Edelman: Thank you all so much.