Interview with **Marian Wright Edelman**
Date: December 21, 1988
Interviewers: Paul Stekler (Interviewer #1) Henry Hampton (Interviewer #2)
Camera Rolls: 4079-4085
Sound Rolls: 433-435
Team: D

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #4079]
[sound roll #433]

00:00:12:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll forty, seventy-nine. Sound four, three, three. Timecode oh, wait a minute.

Marian Wright Edelman:

Yeah, that's a man after my own heart. [laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

I can do this. It's Monday.

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sorry. [laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

Marian Wright Edelman:

Thank you. [laughs]

00:00:30:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, we're going back to Mississippi. How did you get to Mississippi in the first place? How old were you, and what were you doing there?

00:00:38:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

I got to Mississippi because I was Black, and I was twenty-two initially and a law student who had been in the sit-in movement because Mississippi was the worst symbol of the segregated prison that the South represented then. I was a Black kid who wanted to be useful, and I was angry, and I wanted to change things. I was raised to change things. And so all of my friends from SNCC had gone from the sit-in movement in Atlanta where I was a senior at Spelman College down to register voters in Mississippi. Bob Moses, whom I admired deeply, was down there. I had gone off to law school, but I went down to see them and to alleviate my guilt and to give me enough fuel to get through the rest of law school so I could come back to Mississippi.

00:01:18:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. And Mississippi had, had problems. In Mississippi, what was left behind after everyone left in the summer of '64?

00:01:29:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, Mississippi, what was left behind were those extraordinary poor Blacks and Whites. But extraordinary poor Blacks who had done such heroic things to tear down the wall of legal segregation during those hot months of the summer of '64 and before and afterwards. But they were left without a means to live. They were left without enough food to eat. They were left without decent places to stay. They were left without the means to walk through the doors that had been opened by the extraordinary struggles in the courts and in the, the national legislature, in the congress. And by our lawsuits, and by our volunteer lawyers, and by our White students from outside. And the real question that was left in 1965 was how would they live, how would they eat, how would their children be fed and clothed, how would they be able to take advantage of the very narrow openings in the door of legal segregation.

00:02:28:00

Interviewer #1:

Can we stop down for one second?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yes.

[cut]

00:02:31:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:02:32:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, we're back in Mississippi. Tell me again in a more personal terms what happened after everybody left.

00:02:40:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

What happened after everybody left Mississippi in 1964 was that I was left along with one or two colleagues with hundreds of cases that we had delayed trying in order to keep the movement going. There were hundreds and thousands of Black people left with the same misery in their lives as…that had existed before. Although they had a new pride. The country had begun to see their suffering, though it had not begun to respond in the social and economic ways that would make rights real for them and for their children. And so we were left with just lots of burdens. You know, it took me over a decade to use volunteers again because I realized that key to social change is the capacity to stick with it year, after year, after year. And in my panic of wondering how in the world would we try all these cases or settle all these cases, you know, I saw both the great advantage of having volunteers and outside Whites come in to change the politics of Mississippi but also saw the limits of that and that need for sustained ongoing advocacy was gonna be essential if the children of Mississippi and their poor parents were going to have a chance.

Interviewer #1:

Can we [unintelligible] for one second?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sure.

[cut]

00:04:03:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:04:06:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, so what were the problems left behind?

00:04:08:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

The problems left behind for me as a lawyer and with my two colleagues in my office were hundreds—you don't wanna do that. You wanna get to the people.

Interviewer #1:

Start, start off with, "the problem after everyone left…" and [unintelligible]

Marian Wright Edelman:

OK.

00:04:18:00

Interviewer #1:

Start again.

00:04:19:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

After everyone left in the summer of '64, I and my two colleague lawyers were left with hundreds of cases that we had delayed but not tried and which we had struggled to settle or to, to deal with. The poor Blacks of Mississippi were left with, with new pride, new hope, a sense that they could overcome legal segregation. That the country was watching. But they were also left with more poverty, an inability to eat, an inability to, to, to, to have the skills and the tools they needed to take advantage of, of desegregating schools, to take advantage of, of new opportunities provided by the civil rights laws. And we were left therefore with the challenge of seeing how we could begin to put into place the food, and the new…and the healthcare, and the income supports, and the jobs that will enable those people who wanted a better life for their children in fact to attain it. So, all the social and economic problems had underpinned, the legal problems of segregation were left. But at least we had done away with one huge termite.

00:05:27:00

Interviewer #1:

Would you say the biggest problem then was people just being able to survive?

00:05:32:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

It was survival. ***I mean, we were having major problems of hunger. Even starvation. There were people in Mississippi who had no income.*** The federal government was shifting over from food stamps, to food stamps from commodity distribution. And while the commodity distribution program of the Department of Agriculture was lousy, it didn't provide enough food. It wasn't good enough food. It was free. And when you began to shift to food stamps and charge even two dollars per person, there were people in Mississippi who didn't even

have that two dollars. It was very hard to get people from Washington to believe that there were families that could not afford a dollar or two dollars. I always used to look at the dogs in a community to decide how poor that community were. And you would see that mangy, scrawny dogs. Which for me symbolized hunger. And whenever I go into any third world country today, I always look at the dogs. And I used to remember how poor, and skinny, and awful looking the dogs were like. But the poor were struggling. You know, they were being pushed off the plantations because of the mechanization of cotton, because of the use of chemical weed killing. And while it was a, a literal bondage system, the plantation system in Mississippi, in the '40s, '50s, and '60s, where the, Senator Eastland sub—you know, were subsidized hundreds of thousands of dollars by the federal government, the, the peasants or the tenants on those farms literally could not eat and did not have the most basic survival needs in this rich American country.

00:07:02:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Why did you wanna bring the senators down? And particularly I'm curious in terms of what your thoughts were about Bobby Kennedy before you met him in the Delta.

00:07:12:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

I wanted to bring people, the senators…***I tried to bring the senators down to Mississippi because I was trying to figure out ways of getting the country to see.*** You know, when the White students came down in 1964, that helped the country to see because it was their daughters, and, and their sons that were there. And they were afraid for them. These were not people who necessarily had been attune to the problems of the Black poor in America at that time and still too much today does not see the poor Black, Brown, red, needy child. So, in one hand, one, one has to have someone to lift the window. After everybody left, the young people left, and the, at the end of the summer of '64, the problems were still left. They were different. They were changing. We had begun to make a difference, but there were so much suffering that remained to be alleviated. So, one was trying to find new ways to capture the imagination and attention of the American public, so therefore I went to see if I could get the senators to see that it was still bad and indeed was getting worse in many ways. And that hunger was growing even though we had the right to vote. And it's always true that one good thing leads to another that may not be so good. And getting people to register to vote. The cost of that for many was that they got kicked off the plantations and lost that little bit of money unjust as it was that they had had to survive. And so we had to put another means in place. This country is not very well about planning and seeing the consequences of social change.

00:08:45:00

Interviewer #1:

You ended up going on a—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stop for a second.

[cut]

00:08:47:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:08:50:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, we're back in Mississippi in April of '67. How did you end up touring the Delta with Bobby Kennedy and, and what did you guys do?

00:08:50:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, I ended up touring the Delta of Mississippi with Bobby Kennedy because he came down as a substitute for Teddy Kennedy when Joe Clark's senate Committee on Labor and, and Education came to Mississippi. We had been having enormous numbers of Head Start battles, and I had gone up to testify before the committee in Washington about the growing hunger in Mississippi and the fact that many Blacks were being pushed off the plantations. And I told the committee, Please come and see yourselves. Because they didn't quite believe me when I talked about how the conditions of life, the poverty was getting worse, and the people really didn't have enough to eat in Mississippi. And so they came, and Bobby Kennedy came with them. And while they were there to examine the impact of the poverty program on Mississippi Blacks and Whites, I used it as an opportunity to tell them about growing hunger in the Delta, and they were shocked. And happily one or two of the senators agreed to stay over and to go up on the Delta to see for themselves if, if, whether it was true that people were starving. And so Bobby Kennedy agreed to be one of those senators, and happily he went. And he saw, and he made hunger an issue.

00:10:09:00

Interviewer #1:

So, what exactly did you guys do? You started in Jackson.

00:10:12:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Started in Jackson. We drove, got in a car with my husband, Peter in the back. Now husband Peter in the back, and Bobby Kennedy in the driver in the front. And one of the things I remember about Bobby Kennedy is he had no shame. He would ask you anything. I did not know him before he came to Mississippi. In fact my image of him was kind of one of, I don't know what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't what I got. He was a surprisingly unarrogant man. At least in the context of Mississippi. And this was it's important to remember after his brother's death. And I remember the…he asked an awful lot about my life, my background, why I was doing this. He asked me about the last book I'd read, and we had a lot of discuss—he always used to say, What did you just finish reading? And I told him. He asked me about my personal life, and I told him it was none of his business. But at any rate, we ended up going to look in the houses of people who had no income or whose children were not getting enough to eat.

00:11:14:00

Interviewer #1:

So, you're just driving?

00:11:14:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

We were just driving along and chatting along. And from the beginning—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Marian Wright Edelman:

—and again I did not know this man until he came to Mississippi, he was—

00:11:23:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, we have a roll, a roll out on—

Marian Wright Edelman:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's a roll out on camera roll forty, seven, nine.

Camera Crew Member #3:

[inaudible]

[cut]

[camera roll #4080]

00:11:29:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:11:32:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, you're on the tour. And I'm curious, just operational wise for us, you were, you know, what were you…how were you traveling, and were you stopping and starting? What were you doing?

00:11:43:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

We were traveling up from Jackson to rural poor Delta counties. And we went to Cleveland, Mississippi and the surrounding county, and ***we would just go from house to house, and go in and talk to the people. These were very rural, very poor people. And walk through the house, talk to the inhabitants, go in the kitchen, look in the refrigerator, ask them what they ate the night before. And usually you would find awfully bare cupboards when you opened them,*** and people would tell you that they had not had enough to eat the night before. I lost one. When Senator Kennedy asked what they'd had for dinner the night before, and they'd said pork chops, but that was the only one I lost unfortunately. Because most of the cupboards were unbelievably bare. And there were people when he asked how they were eating would say they had no money, that they were being supported by food stamps, by

surplus commodities, or by their neighbors. And when he inquired about whether they could afford or could get food stamps, they would say no and that they had no money and no income. And it was shocking but hard to believe that there were people in America in 1967 who had no income.

00:12:51:00

Interviewer #1:

You told me something about, about, about that, the trip where you said you were very moved by something that Bobby Kennedy did.

00:12:58:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

I was very moved by, by what Bobby Kennedy did when we went to visit Annie White in Cleveland, Mississippi. And again without cameras and because he was Bobby Kennedy, a lot of, some newspaper men, men had come along, but we went inside a very dark and dank shack in Cleveland Mississippi. It was very filthy and very poor. And when we walked through from front to back together, there was in the kitchen where a mother was kind of scrubbing in a, in a tin can, tin washing clothes in a tin tub. There was a child sitting on a dirt floor, filthy. And there was very little light there. And he got down on his knees, and he tried to talk to the child and get a response from the child. He kept poking or feeling the child and saying…and trying to get some response. And I remember watching him in near tears because I kept saying to myself, I had this, this complicated feeling. I was moved by it and wondering whether I would have gotten down on that dirty floor. But deeply I'm respectful that he did. And he could do almost anything after that, and I trusted him from that time on just as a human being. And then he went out to the backyard where the reporters were waiting, and he was correctly angry. But from that moment on, I knew that somehow he would be a major part in, in trying to deal with hunger in Mississippi for children.

00:14:33:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut please.

[cut]

00:14:36:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:14:38:00

Interviewer #1:

So, what else comes to mind about that tour?

00:14:41:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

What comes to mind during that same day in Cleveland, Mississippi, I think, was going by this time with the motorcade, whether it was towards the airport, and he didn't like the siren very much and didn't like the fanfare. But somehow the motorcade happened to run over a child's dog. And I remember him stopping, and getting out of the car, and trying to console the child. And I, you know, this was a man who was very open and attune to suffering. And he went back to Washington, but he sent my now husband back with agriculture officials, went over to Orville Freeman, and said, Just get the food down there, Orville. And because they knew that, that agriculture department officials might not believe even the senators when they, they were told that there was no…there were people down in Mississippi with no income, they sent my husband back, which I'm eternally grateful, to come back and to go with the agriculture department officials and to show them those families that he had seen so that we could begin to build a better response to the outrageous hunger that was pervading the land. You know, I'm absolutely outraged that all that effort in 1967 and '68 which led to a major national response over year, a few years after an extraordinary amount of effort, it should never be so hard to feed children in a, in a, in an affluent country like this. But then we began to do that in the early '70s. And to see hunger come back to America again and to come back to poor rural communities again is sobering and I think a cause for real soul searching.

00:16:23:00

Interviewer #1:

You said that Kennedy got angry. Did…what did he tell you?

00:16:27:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, I remember that he said that he'd never…he was shocked. That he just did not believe, Senator Kennedy said, said he didn't believe that there were these conditions in America. And he could not have remembered seeing any poverty like this in his own country. This reminded him of visits to other countries, to South Africa, to third world countries. But he

had no, no sense that this kind of poverty existed in America, and he had not seen a thing like it at home.

00:16:54:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:16:56:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:16:59:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, so bring us to the intro that gets you into, into where you're gonna hear about this idea and what happened.

00:17:04:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, the good thing about Bobby Kennedy is he was tenacious, too. I mean, once he got into a problem, and saw it, and understood it, you know, what it meant in terms of child suffering, he wouldn't let it go. And he began to get frustrated but continued to push in trying to get the agriculture department and the Johnson administration to respond to poverty. I was frustrated because I could see on a day-to-day basis the continuing suffering that was going on. By this time, the Vietnam War had started, and the country was being diverted away from the problems of poverty and, and hunger. Dr. King was getting frustrated because the movement had moved north. And once things would hit one's own neighborhood, things began to, to be more difficult. So, I saw him a lot, and he became a friend. And we were always plotting on how could we keep trying to get the country to respond to the poor children and, and to, and to the, to the growing hunger problem, which was a national problem and wasn't just limited to Mississippi. And one day when I was up in Washington from Mississippi doing a number

of things, I went out to Hickory Hill with my husband, Peter, who was his legislative assistant at the time. And I remember sitting around the pool, and I was about to leave Washington. He was sitting there, lounging, and he asked me where I was going and why I was going back home. And I said I was going back to Jackson, but I was gonna stop by Atlanta and see Dr. King. And…because he was kind of down and was trying to figure out what he wanted to do next and how he could get the country to deal with the economic problems we were all facing. And with the diversion of attention to the Vietnam War. And he said, Tell him to, to, to, bring the poor people to Washington. You know, tell him that. Because we got to somehow have something that was, was able to focus the consciousness of the country and that you wouldn't get them to do that unless there was some visible demonstration. And I said I would. And I, I said bye, and got on the plane, and went down to see Martin, who was real depressed at the time. Went into his little office. I went back to visit it recently. I mean, very modest office. And he was really sitting there, trying to figure out what in the world he was gonna do next. And I told him that Bobby Kennedy said he ought to come to Washington. And, you know, I felt he treated me as if I were an angel delivering a message. And ***he immediately understood that it was right, and then we chatted a bit about how it would be done. But there was never any discussion about whether that was the right thing to do.*** And I was glad I could bring a little bit of relief. I mean, that discussion went on, and then I took my plane on to Mississippi. And the planning for the Poor People's Campaign ensued. And, you know, we know what the rest was.

00:19:47:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

[cut]

Interviewer #1:

[inaudible] beyond.

00:19:51:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Got about ninety feet left.

00:19:55:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Again, walk us through the process from when you first heard and your reaction to when you told Dr. King and his reaction. What was going on with that?

00:20:04:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, I was in Washington for doing whatever business I was doing for Mississippi at that time and went by Hickory Hill to say bye to him with my now husband, who was his legislative assistant. And it was a gorgeous day, and he was lounging out around the pool at Hickory Hill. And we had went through our usual small chat about what was going on, and when I was leaving. But I also told him I was gonna stop back through Atlanta and see Dr. King, and he said, Tell him to bring the poor people to Washington. That it's time for, you know, some visible expression of concern for the poor. I had been expressing to him my frustration that hunger was still going on, and obviously he was still frustrated that the agriculture department was so slow in doing something about it, or the Johnson administration was hesitant to move. So, he thought that there really needed to be some, some push, some national visible push. But it was a very simple suggestion. You know, tell Dr. King to bring the poor people to Washington. So, I got on my plane, and I told Dr. King to do just that. And again as simple as the suggestion was from Bobby Kennedy, when I walked into Dr. King's office at SCLC, he was really down. I mean, this was a period of White reaction and backlash. It was a period when the war was becoming a much more divisive force. Where the problems, the Black and poor people were being left behind, and, and people thought they were annoyances. And, and you'd had a lot of violence in, in northern cities. And, and, and Martin King was really depressed. And one of the things I always remembered about him from my early student days was how he was able to share his uncertainties, share his…not knowing what to do next. I remember his Founder's Day speech when I was senior at Spelman College when he talked about taking that one step even if you can't see the whole way and how you just have to keep moving even if you're slower than you want. If you can't walk, crawl, but keep moving. He was real down that day when I walked in from Atlanta sitting in his office, and he was like everybody at that time. Kennedy, and me, and all of us concerned about the poor, and what was happening to civil rights, and the country turning itself away from it, about what we were gonna do next. And I told him that Bobby Kennedy said he ought to bring the poor people to Washington. And as simply as Bobby Kennedy had said it, King instinctively felt that that was right and treated me as if I was an emissary of grace here or something that brought him some light.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Marian Wright Edelman:

And out of that the Poor People's Campaign was born.

00:22:37:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's a roll out on—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

—camera roll forty, [inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible] like that. That was nice.

[cut]

[camera roll #4081]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Forty, eighty-one. Timecode oh, four, one, seven.

00:22:43:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:22:46:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, we're in his study. And you come, and you've given him this idea. The words have just come out of your mouth. What did you see? Was…did his state of being change? Did his eyes open? I mean, what did you see?

00:23:02:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Enormous relief. That somehow an answer had come. And I felt enormous gratitude and astonishment [laughs] that somehow I in great…you know, that I was able to be helpful. Because it was a struggle to know where to go next because the country really was turning away. And things really were hard. And trying to find new paths to, to, to deal with the seemingly intractable problems of both northern and rural poverty, you know, was getting a lot of folk down. We were searching for places to go. And obviously Dr. King was under more burden and responsibility to, to take us to that next step than any. So, there was relief. We chitchatted a bit about the strategies, but he instinctively knew how to mobilize and do the mechanics. But the point is that the idea felt right to him, and I really felt as I left there that I had helped and that we were gonna move on to something new.

00:24:02:00

Interviewer #1:

So, what happened with the idea right after that into the fall?

00:24:07:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Oh, all of the SCLC machinery went into place. You know, the planning, the mule trains and to get the poor from all over the country to Washington began to take place. I mean, these are large logistical exercises. I went back to doing my work in Mississippi but in the interim had decided to move to Washington because it became clear to me that I could continue to try as many lawsuits as I did in, in Mississippi but unless the justice department and HEW were doing its job in making sure that the schools were desegregated that we were not gonna have a massive impact. I could continue to come to Washington as I did often to get, help get the Head Start program, the Child Development Group of Mississippi, which is the seeds of CDF today, refunded and to try to answer Senator Stennis that unless the poor had someone there who was looking after their interest all the time and that could provide an early alert system, and, and, and answer back the Stennises who were misstating the facts about what poor parents and poor people's programs were doing that we'd never make any, any significant progress. And that while all of us had correctly and with limited resources engaged in principle setting litigation and worked to pass major new civil rights laws that unless somebody was in there trying to help implement them, to make sure that people were aware of their rights, to make sure that there were good regulations, and to make sure that there was a voice in, in Washington we would not have the kind of ongoing change. So that I prepared myself to phase out my Mississippi work and then to move to Washington.

00:25:42:00

Interviewer #1:

Any major memories from [pause] can…stop down for one second.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sure.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer #1:

So, I'd like you to start—

[technical problem]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Can you just stop, stop?

Interviewer #1:

Stop down?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

[cut]

00:25:59:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:26:02:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. In, in a, in a couple of phrases tell me what happened in terms of in the fall, tha-that following fall. We did this, and we listened to the, the, the retreat and what happened or what you remember.

00:26:14:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, after I had gone to Atlanta that time to see Dr. King and convey Bobby Kennedy's message about bringing the poor people to Washington and having a Poor People's Campaign, SCLC then began to mobilize and, and to, to plan the logistics of such a move. There was a retreat at Earlyhouse out in Virginia where he brought together a number of his senior staff and some outsiders. I remember Joan Baez being there, and it was the first time I think I ever sort of got to see Jesse in any sustained way. He was a young preacher. But again, Martin was back talking about the mood of the country and how difficult it all was, and trying to put into perspective what was happening in the North, and all the violence, and the, and the, and the turning away again of the nation. And again he was real down because it was real hard. It was real hard and still is to get America to hear. And it was the first time I'd heard Jesse preach 'cause I really didn't know Jesse then. And, and I wondered who this younger preacher was that Martin asked to give a sermon the first night. We were singing, and praying, and struggling, and trying to be together. And Jesse preached on Job, and in a sense asked God's forgiveness for our being…giving up when things were getting tough. I remember it very poignantly as if it were yesterday. And I remember how, you know, as tired as everybody was and as frustrated as everybody was how there was also a sense of forgive, forgive us for not wanting to, not, not not wanting but not being able to deal with how hard it is. And there was a decision to move ahead and to proceed with the Poor People's Campaign, understanding it was gonna be a real struggle. But I think that consolidated it and got the planning process going.

00:28:04:00

Interviewer #1:

I need you to go back one more time.

Marian Wright Edelman:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

To the time when you communicated the idea 'cause I need a couple sentences to be able to cut with something.

00:28:11:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

So, he's there. You've given him the idea. I'm gonna ask you did he respond, and I'd like you to start, "He responded and…" And so—

Camera Crew Member #2:

I'm gonna go, come back slightly wider, OK?

Interviewer #1:

OK, sure. Tell me when you're ready.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Ready.

Interviewer #1:

OK. You've given him the idea. Did he respond?

Marian Wright Edelman:

When I told him that Robert Kennedy…when I told Dr. King that—

00:28:35:00

Interviewer #1:

Start again.

00:28:36:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Sorry about that. When I walked into his office and when we're talking about what in the world we're gonna do next, and I told him that Bobby Kennedy said that he should bring the poor people to Washington and have a poor people's campaign, he responded instinctively and immediately that that felt right and that he would do it. And, you know, while the logistics still remained to be worked out, I certainly left there and went back to Mississippi with the sense that it was done. That it would be done even though we had not figured out all of the, the hows.

00:29:09:00

Interviewer #1:

That’s fine.

Marian Wright Edelman:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

[cut]

[sound roll #434]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sound is new. Four, three, four.

00:29:14:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:29:17:00

Interviewer #1:

I’m gonna jump around a little bit, but the first question I wanna ask is so all these people were brought to Washington D.C. Were there specific plans about what they were gonna get when they got there?

00:29:29:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Of course not. This was a Poor People's Campaign. And you also have to remember that we had gone through some real tragedy. It was a Poor People's Campaign without Dr. King and without the leaders who had conceptualized it in, in, in many ways and inspired it to carry it

forth. So, we were a bedraggled Poor People's Campaign. And secondly unlike rich people, poor people don't have rich, fancy, well financed lawyers who were there sort of developing position papers. And while I had moved to Washington to think about how I could, could become a lawyer for the poor or for programs like the poor Head Start program that Senator Stennis was attacking in Mississippi, you know, I was not going into immediate business. I was gonna see if I could learn how to think again.

00:30:17:00

Interviewer #1:

Can I cut in for one second?

Marian Wright Edelman:

Yeah, sure.

Interviewer #1:

Let's start again and, and trying to incorporate the question into the answer.

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs] Question? All right.

00:30:25:00

Interviewer #1:

Were there specific plans beforehand?

00:30:28:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

There were not specific plans. There were general plans. They were coming to Washington. I didn't do it again, did I?

00:30:34:00

Interviewer #1:

No, no, you were fine.

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

So, were there specific—

Camera Crew Member #2:

We gonna have to change [inaudible]

00:30:40:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

I think that the Poor People's Campaign—

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible], one second. One second.

Camera Crew Member #2:

We have a hundred feet left.

Interviewer #1:

We're fine. OK. One more time.

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs]

00:30:46:00

Interviewer #1:

Were there specific plans?

00:30:48:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

I don't recall specific plans for the Poor People's Campaign. They were coming to Washington out of a general and urgent need. They were hungry. There was growing poverty, but they had lost their leader. We were a bit bedraggled as a campaign. And when I began to meet with them when they came here, it was very clear that the specific position

papers and what they would ask each agency to do or what they would ask the president to do needed to be fleshed out. So, I got myself an instant job of developing those position papers.

00:31:20:00

Interviewer #1:

And you talked to me on the phone about a group that you formed with Roger Wilkens and Carl Holman. Can you tell me who was in that group and what you did?

00:31:27:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, again, I was a, I was, I was a twenty-seven, twenty-eight year old lawyer who had been up in Washington a month or two from Mississippi, not wise to the ways of the town, though learning and determined. And the only way I was able to go through and be technically correct on what it is the poor people should be asking for was by getting the help of people inside agencies who knew programs, and policies, and politics in great details. So, in a sense I had a silent quiet cabinet that would meet every night at ten or eleven o'clock. People like Lyle Carter, who was then an Assistant Secretary at HEW, Carl Holman who was a Deputy Director of the Civil Rights Commission. Roger Wilkens, who was an Assistant Secretary at the Justice Department. John Schnittker, who was the Undersecretary of Agriculture but someone who cared about hungry people. And there were a network of sympathetic officials, and we would meet. And I would draft position papers, and they would help me correct them. And, and making sure that I was not off base. And then I would deliver those to Ralph Abernathy over at the motel in the middle of the night, and he would get up and say them the next morning. There were…but we were able to function in that way because the poor brought their needs, and they brought their eloquence. In fact one of the things I remember most is once when we were doing hearings on the Hill during the Poor People's Campaign, we decided to have the poor people from Resurrection come and line the subways on the way to the senate. And I remember a senator, to show you how spaced out we are about the poor in America, coming up to compliment me on the costumes of my people. And it took me a little while to realize that he was really talking about these poor people. One of the hearings I am proudest of because it was again a hearing that was not carefully conceptualized in the way in which we try to conceptualize hearings at the Children's Defense Fund today but poor people, all kinds. The Native Americans from their reservations, and, and the Mexican-Americans from their point of need, and the rural Blacks, and the rural Whites. And you have to understand, this was the first time that poor people of all colors had a…had come together to express their need in, in, in their own way. And one of the most eloquent hearings I can remember ever in Washington was simply pulling together these people to talk about the representative kinds of poverty that was a universal kind of poverty that is more true today. But you know, I felt privileged to kinda be their lawyer, but it took—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Marian Wright Edelman:

—both the eloquence of the poor but also the technical know-how of those middle-class leaders to make it happen.

00:34:03:00

Interviewer #1:

That was very, very nice.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible] from that, that hearing.

Marian Wright Edelman:

Do you really? It was a wonderful hearing. I still remember—

[cut]

[camera roll #4082]

00:34:09:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

I'm sorry. You did say it. Slate it please.

[slate]

00:34:13:00

Interviewer #1:

Resurrection City is starting, and Ralph Abernathy has hit the first nail in. The mule trains are coming up. The buses have come up. What were your expectations?

00:34:22:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

You know, I don't know what my expectations were for, for Resurrection City or for the Poor People's Campaign was, other than simply people have got to hear. We were all very hurt. We had lost Dr. King. We were trying very hard to carry on. We were determined that the poor would be seen and heard. It was, it was such a struggle. I mean, what I remember most about Resurrection City was the mud and the rain which came along with the poor people. How haphazard the, the, the logistics were and how hard but, you know, it was to go out to try to get them to be witnesses but how willing and open they always were in a very new setting about going to do this. And it…and I always have felt somewhat schizophrenic because on one hand going out to Resurrection City to identify and talk to witnesses, at the same time to try to craft what they said in a way in which Washington bureaucrats can hear it. So, I ran this, this back-and-forth thing from sort of living out in Resurrection City to sort of hear from them what was needed and, and then back to kind of the, the leaders, whether Reverend Abernathy over at the Pit Hotel [sic], which is today one of our worst homeless shelters in, in the District of Columbia where SCLC staff were staying or Dr. Abernathy was staying. But it was, it was both, [sighs] it was a struggle. And the poor were so moving and again so determined to try to do what they could. And so needy. And so I guess my expectation was just to sort of get through the day and to get them heard, and, and still always as today to try to see if the country can't respond.

00:36:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Did you expect the country to respond?

00:36:14:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Listen, I always expect the country to do what is right, but I always work [laughs] to, to get up when they don't. I never understood then and I don't understand now why it was so hard to get hungry people fed in rich America and why the needs of poor children were always superseded by politics. This was you have to remember in the middle of an election campaign. Robert Kennedy was by this time challenging Lyndon Baines Johnson. We were in the middle of the war in Vietnam. People were beginning to realize we couldn't, or, or to say we couldn't have guns and butter. And so the poor were kind of an annoyance over here. And, and something that, that the country wanted to forget. And so it was just real hard, and I never get used to how hard it is and how, you know, people can listen to the voices of need from, from Indian reservations or about hungry children anywhere and still find excuses for not acting.

00:37:15:00

Interviewer #1:

You focused on one issue. What issue did you focus on, and why, and how?

00:37:19:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, each day though the poor people, I didn't focus…the Poor People's Campaign didn't focus just on one issue. They went to different agencies each day, and a position paper had to be prepared for each of them. We would go to the Justice Department and would be met by the Attorney General. And Dr. Abernathy would, would read his statement that had been prepared the night before with the help of government officials like Roger Wilkens, and Lyle Carter, and Carl Holman. And we'd craft these things in the middle of the night and get Dr. Abernathy to approve them. And then the poor would join Dr. Abernathy, and we went to a different agency. Maybe two a day. I don't remember the logistics. The files are very old now. And would make the speech and make sets of demands. And this went on at, at the agriculture department where, again, hunger at that time I recall as being the overarching issue and which became the kind of issue of focus because of what had happened in Mississippi earlier. Because more and more people were beginning to realize that hunger was a more widespread problem than other because it was such a clear-cut clarion to decency. So that I guess I recall most the, the, the agriculture department meetings with Secretary Freeman and in discussions with the White House officials at that time most of our focus was on trying to get a victory for the poor by getting them to respond and get the national government to get some food to them as Bobby Kennedy had, had urged them. But again it had gotten mixed into the politics of Kennedy and Johnson at that point, and so we went away I think from Washington not only depressed about Dr. King's death but also depressed that our government had been so niggardly and political in responding to what was a clear and urgent need.

00:39:00:00

Interviewer #1:

Was it naïve to think that the government would respond that quickly to something while you were in town?

00:39:04:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

It is never naïve to think that a, a democratic country will do what is right. It is, you know, and you keep at it. Today I still think that Americans are going to respond to growing child hunger and homelessness even if I know when we'll work for another ten or fifteen years to get them to do that. But you gotta have both the vision and the expectation.

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Marian Wright Edelman:

Go ahead.

00:39:30:00

Interviewer #1:

What happened with Resurrection City then and with your efforts?

00:39:35:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

That Resurrection City went away, I think, in disappointment. It got marred in mud and got marred in politics. But I think that the poor had made themselves heard. Washington was never quite the same again. It taught me the lesson of, of follow up. That nothing does come quick, that nothing is one shot. That one has to do public awareness and raise consciousness. But then one has to have a mechanism to keep at it and that one can't do a whole lot of issues. So, that, out of Resurrection City and out of the Poor People's Campaign, the Washington Research Project was born, and the Washington Research Project became the Children's Defense Fund. And ironically we're still talking about these same issues today, though the country has made significant progress. In fact because of the range of issues that were set into force with Robert Kennedy's visit to Mississippi, with the constant pushing of the agriculture department, with the, the McGovern Commission on Hunger. Over a period of years when President Nixon came in, this country greatly expanded the food programs, the child lunch programs, the food stamp programs thanks to the advocacy of lots of people. But I know that the Poor People's Campaign now in retrospect played an enormously important role in making all of that happen.

00:40:49:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. I'm looking for, for—

Marian Wright Edelman:

[coughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—at the end of this year. And I'll give you your first shot, and then I'll remind you [laughs] of some of the things that you told me last time. But, I mean, this is not a good year. And when you refer to this year—

00:41:03:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

It's not a good year, yeah. [laughs]

00:41:07:00

Interviewer #1:

—you refer to Kennedy and to Dr. King at least on the phone as Bobby—

Marian Wright Edelman:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

—and Martin, which I think may be more affective in, in looking back at this. Can you tell me why it wasn't a good year with, with what happened, and with all these things, and what your resolve was though? I mean, how'd it…where did it leave you at the same time? So, tell me about looking over at Resurrection City, after that year.

00:41:28:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, 1968 was a very complicated year. And obviously it was not a good year. We lost Martin King. We lost Bobby Kennedy. The Poor People's Campaign went away in somewhat disarray. The country had not responded. We were…it was the close of the first era of the '60s. Too much, too many Americans tend to think of the '60s at monolithic. For me it was the end of that period of nonviolent struggle to get America to see and hear its poor and minority populations. And so in one sense the Poor People's Camp-Campaign brought that to a close. And it was the beginning of the second part of the '60s, which was the Vietnam War, the more violent period, the reaction to the loss of leadership and to the violence of the nation that destroyed the, the, the voices for sanity. Which were Bobby and Martin during that period. And so it was a, an important hiatus for the country, but I think it's so important that we remember, you know, the good sides, the struggle, the extraordinary leadership that was exercised under leaders like Martin King and Bobby Kennedy but with those ordinary

women all of America, those ordinary poor people all over America who had faith and who struggled to make American institutions respond in a nonviolent way. And that is my '60s, and that is the dominant view that I have of the '60s.

00:42:52:00

Interviewer #1:

Shut down for a sec?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sure.

[cut]

00:42:56:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:42:58:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. One more time, what was the year like, and where did that leave you and/or the movement in terms of what to do?

00:43:05:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

The year 1968 was an extraordinarily difficult year. I mean, we lost Martin. We lost Bobby. The Poor People's Campaign had come to an end without an adequate national response to hunger. The Vietnam War was becoming a terribly divisive force. And so the era of nonviolence which was the Black movement was ending, and the era of violence in reaction to the loss of, of, of our leaders was beginning. ***And for those of us who were determined to carry on the legacy of Martin, it was a time to regroup, and rethink, and get up and figure out new strategies to build new paths toward the future to deal with the issues of poverty, and deal with the issues of race that were gonna be ongoing but clearly much more difficult.*** So, in one sense it was the close of an era that left us very sad, and in the other sense it was a beginning which I think has led to kind of new strategies of

advocacy, to groups like the Children's Defense Fund today. And this country has still got to hear if it's gonna save itself for the future.

00:44:07:00

Interviewer #1:

So, you never thought at the end of 1968 of giving up?

00:44:11:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Giving up was simply not a part of the language of my childhood or my upraising. You don't give up. Nobody has a right to give up on any child. I don't think you have a right to give up on your country. You never give up on your ideals. And those of us who really believed in the things that Dr. King stood for have an obligation to try to follow him and rather than just celebrate him. I would never give up as long as we have poverty or racism in this country, and we still do.

00:44:36:00

Interviewer #1:

You told me about getting up in the morning—

Camera Crew Member #2:

We have to change rolls.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, going to camera roll forty, eighty-three.

[cut]

[camera roll #4083]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sound four, three, four.

[slate]

00:44:46:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Thank you.

00:44:48:00

Interviewer #1:

You told me something on the phone about in the response to, is the movement dead getting up in the morning and going on. Can you tell me about that?

00:44:58:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, I get very annoyed when people ask me whether the movement died in 1968. I mean, the movement didn't die. It changed forms. You get up as I got up the next morning, and lots of other people got up the next morning after, after the Poor People's Campaign ended, and Martin got killed, or Bobby got killed, and we figured out what we would do next. I remember a group of us sitting around behind…after Martin's funeral to say, What are we gonna do next? I mean, what you do next is you go home, and you get a good night's sleep, and you think about how you get up tomorrow. And you carry on his work. But 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 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 so that Whites would receive it as their self-interest. It's always 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, and non-poor children and White children. And so we were creating a, setting out on the 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. And it was excruciatingly hard in the early years. But, you know, fifteen years later, twenty years later, I think it was clearly the right new path because this nation now is coming absolutely face to face with the fact that unless it invests in its children and its non-White and poor children as much as its privileged and White ones, it is not gonna be able to lead morally in the new century, nor is it gonna be able to, to compete economically. So, for the first time in my years of being an advocate for the poor and disadvantaged for children, doing what is morally right, what Dr. King called for twenty years ago, thirty years ago, and doing what is absolutely necessary to save our national skin has converged. So, the nation is gonna have to deal with Dr. King's issues or die.

00:47:07:00

Interviewer #1:

For me for cutting purposes—

00:47:09:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—Bobby, can you pull in tight on this one?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yes, I will. OK.

00:47:13:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, one more time, starting with the idea of getting up in the morning and continuing. And continuing on with the work of those who had left us in '68. So, at the end of '68, you were talking about getting up in the morning. Can you tell me about that one more time?

00:47:29:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, the end of '68, the issue was how do we carry on from here, how do we continue the work of, of Martin and, and what had begun in the civil rights movement but needed to have social and economic underpinnings. How do we continue to try to respond to the calls of the Poor People's Campaign? And so we created new organizations, developed new strategies, new modes of advocacy to try to begin to build paths to get the country to respond to the, to the social and economic needs of, of its poor. Very hard with the war. Very hard with the northern White backlash. Very hard with the violence. Because, again, we tend to blur the violence of the Vietnam War, which was mostly White kids in the riots which came in reaction to the violence of, of those who took the lives of Martin and, and, and Robert Kennedy. So, it was very hard to be heard. But, you know, they're fallowed periods, and one has to remember the seasons. That in the barest points of winter one really does have to remember that leaves will come again in the spring. And so those spring leaves and buds are beginning to, to, to, to blossom now in a new I think recognition by the country that it is in deep trouble, that the messages of Martin twenty years ago are the messages that we have

still got to answer today. But I think paradoxically again the Reagan years which have been very hard years, assaults on the national role in protecting the poor and the minority groups has set the stage for the 1990s. Because this country will have to confront the issues of investing in its children and families if it is going to preserve its future. Sorry I don't have much eloquence left there in that. For whatever reason, it feels very—

00:49:13:00

Interviewer #1:

That's fine, that's fine.

Marian Wright Edelman:

—circuitous to me.

[cut]

00:49:15:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:49:18:00

Interviewer #1:

So, when Resurrection City was done, did you ever think about giving up?

00:49:23:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

When Resurrection City was done, I never thought about giving up. It was, you know, I thought how do I get up and figure out a new way to keep going. I don't think anybody ever has a right or…to give up on children or give up on the poor. The needs remain. The needs grow. I was raised at a time by Black adults, my daddy was a preacher like Dr. King where if you saw a need, you, you, you, you tried to respond. And they showed us by personal example how to respond. In my little hometown in rural segregated South Carolina, there was no playground where Black kids could go and play because we were segregated, so my daddy built a playground behind the church. There was no Black home for the aged in South Carolina to take the elderly, so that my daddy and momma started one. And we kids were taught to, to serve, and clean, and cook. So, we learned that it was our responsibility to take

care of the elderly. The question was never why if there was need should somebody else do something. We were taught to ask why I don't do something. And Dr. King, and Whitney Young, and others of the '60s reenforced that in college. And so when…and by his example he struggled and went through his doubts. He was often discouraged. He was often des—depressed. He didn't know where he was gonna go from day to day despite the larger vision for what was right for America. And so what right did we have not to try to carry on. None of us have his eloquence and certainly not his goodness. But in our own ways with our hands and our limited visions, we can try to craft together his dream for the children who have not yet had a chance to realize it. So, no, it didn't occur to me to give up. It occurred to me to go on and figure out a way to make it happen.

00:51:03:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut. That was great.

[cut]

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs]

00:51:09:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:51:10:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. I wanted to ask you about Martin's death, Dr. King's death because it was one of those, those times that caught us all. When did…where were you when you found out, and what did you feel like?

00:51:23:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

I was in my apartment over on 6th and G Street Southeast here in Washington D.C. I couldn't believe it. I was supposed to have dinner with Peter, my now husband, and with Judge David Bazelon at the Cosmos Club where women had the privilege of going in

through the back door. And that evening. And I know I went with Peter to do it, but I got up because I really wasn't prepared to sit there on that evening and have dinner in that place at that time. And, you know, Martin, it was like a piece of you had died. I was angry. I was hurt. I was absolutely unbelieving. I still never can understand why we kill the best in ourselves. It never occurred to me that what he was and what he stood for wouldn't live. And that was the obligation of all of us to see that it did. And the riots broke out. The fear, the smoke, the, the disarray. And I remember going out to a school in Washington at my sister's and someone else's request to try to get the kids to stay off the street. And I don't remember which school I went to. But when I was talking to a group of Black kids here in the middle of the riots, which were horrible, to tell them not to participate because if they did they would be risking their own futures.

00:52:59:00

Interviewer #2:

How did you hear it?

Marian Wright Edelman:

How did I hear it? How'd I hear the riots?

Interviewer #2:

No, King.

00:53:07:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

King. [pause] [sighs] I heard it as a rejection. I heard it as saying never in many ways. I heard it with deep anger. And in one sense one side of me understood the kids out there throwing the bottles and, and burning the buildings. I heard it with a, [pause] I heard it the way Martin would have heard it. In, in, in some ways. I heard it as saying, Go on. Don't let it get you. You know, there's that old saying about Booker T. Washington that I got in my early childhood, Don't ever let any man drag you so low as to make them hate you. And I used to tell myself, and I used to want to hate them. [laughs] And when I used to see Cecil Price one day in court when Judge Cox sat him down at my table, and I thought I, I realized I was capable of murder. So, one knows that one is always capable of the foibles of every other human being. And only by grace does somehow one keep from being that. But the, the, the…but I was never during the Mississippi years and even during the loss of King going to let them beat us or prevail because my daddy, and my momma, and all the old folk in my background, and Martin King had told us that we were better, that we could, we could, we could overcome that. That we didn't have to be like them. That we could teach them something. That there was something higher. That we could win. And that winning meant winning inside. You know, those old folk in my church, and again, it's the same old thing

that Martin preached. They never cracked a book of theology or philosophy, but the thing that they anchored us in was that the kingdom of God is within. Not in what you have. And Martin didn't have anything. Nobody ever remembers what kinda suits he wore or anything else. But in what you are. And so in that sense, that kind of inner anchoring…

00:55:40:00

Interviewer #2:

Let me jump you—

Marian Wright Edelman:

Jump back. And maybe I'm not answering your question, Henry. Because I mean, when you said how did I hear it, what, what, what do you mean by that? Because I took it in a different sense.

Interviewer #2:

You did just fine. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Let's change rolls.

Marian Wright Edelman:

What did you mean?

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll forty, eighty-four—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

[cut]

[camera roll #4084]

00:55:54:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:55:57:00

Interviewer #2:

The Meredith March. It sort of burst on the national scene, but really it begins to capture the, the words "Black Power." And Black Power gets turned into Black only by bad media and some other things. During those years, you were in Mississippi.

00:56:18:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

I was in Mississippi. And Stokely was in Mississippi. And again, most of the SNCC kids were struggling on and off plantations, trying to register to vote. And my dominant feeling about Stokely, I mean, it goes back to the earlier days of how he would come off plantations where he'd been shot at, and he could laugh about how close the call was. And if I remember back to the Meredith March, I guess I have two dominant memories. It was at the end of each of day, Dr. King, listening to Stokely and other young people who by that time had been so frustrated about the slow response of the country on voter registration and on implementing the new civil rights laws, and who saw the continuing poverty, and saw the continuing violence that they were really saying to Dr. King that it was time for us all to be more aggressive. And I remember how Martin would listen to the frustration, particularly after Meredith had got shot. They wanted to do something. And he'd keep, he would keep asking Stokely, What is it that you wanna do? And, oh, Stokely, is it really so bad? But the patience of, of listening in the middle of the pressures of the day-to-day marches with the, with the police and the, and the state troopers, and the, and the, and the, and the tear gas. I remember the tear gas, and I remember Canton, Mississippi particularly of the tear gas. But I also remember the houses with Stokely haranguing about the need to sort of be more assertive, to have Black Power, to, to push the Whites out, to have more leadership and more strong leadership come. And Martin not really understanding it or understanding how and why Stokely was so angry. Because he was coming from a very different point of view.

00:57:55:00

Interviewer #1:

How about the, the, the pressure to push Whites out of the movement?

00:57:58:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Well, you know, it was very hard for Whites to come in as partners. As equal partners or even as partners where they would not be leaders. It was very important. Despite the fact that the Whites coming in for the summer project of 1964 under Bob Moses and other responded to the call, and, and got the country to focus, you know, there's always a double side to that. Why should it take Whites to have to come in to get the country to look and see its Blacks who are all equal before God? So, there was always this edge in all of us about why it takes a White kid to make the country look at a Black kid. And that was always underneath the surface. And secondly when you had lots of eager and, and wonderful young people come…and I remember Reid College particularly 'cause I think I recall that Reed sent more kids down to the summer project in '64 almost than any other college. And many of those remain my good friends today. It's very hard for them to be patient and to work under, and, and to take the…let, let the local people take leads. That's still a hard job for many organizers today going in and, and really responding and following local people as opposed to asserting themselves. And so tensions developed rather early. And there came a point I think with Bob Moses and many others when it was very clear that Blacks would have to begin to do for themselves the kind of leadership which they had been doing for years, and years, and years but without the kind of national response that was required if they were gonna move on to the next stages of development. So that there became a period when it was clear that it was best for Whites to begin to withdraw, for Blacks to begin to assert more leadership. And, you know, things go in cycles. And I think that the role of the Whites in '64 and '65, terribly important. But it was time to go. I mean, there was a time for Mr. Gandhi, told his young White advisors to leave so that it, you know, because it, it had to be in fact, and it had to be perceived that those people seeking freedom who have a long history as Blacks do of seeking to, to, to, to, to carve out their own future, and self-determination, and self-reliance is a strong Black tradition. Because we had nobody else to rely on. But that it was time for us to go back to relying primarily on ourselves.

01:00:15:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm gonna have to change sound rolls.

Marian Wright Edelman:

I'm sorry. I'm going—

[cut]

[sound roll #435]

Marian Wright Edelman:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Continuation of sound roll forty, eighty-four. New camera roll. I mean new, new sound roll four, three, five. Sound—I mean, camera is—

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

—four [inaudible]

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs]

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

01:00:30:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Marian Wright Edelman:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[laughs] Sorry.

01:00:34:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. King was a portion of our lives.

Marian Wright Edelman:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

And then this almost myth begins to emerge and unearth about this man named Malcolm X. You remember your first feelings on hearing him and the first time you met him?

01:00:49:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

The first time I met Malcolm X was when I was a law student at Yale Law School. He had come to the law school to speak. I was sitting in the back of the audience. He walked up to me and said, Marian Wright, I'm Malcolm X. And I sort, I mean, I, I withdrew and said, Who did, how does this man know who I am? I then looked at some of these handsome Black men standing behind him, and I recognized a number of people who were his followers from my hometown there. But he knew almost everything about me and wanted to sit down and talk. He spoke that night at Yale Law School's auditorium, and he was absolutely mesmerizing. He was brilliant. He was funny. He expressed the rage that all of us had continued to feel about the slow pace of change in the country, but he did it in the cleverest, and the funniest, and the most put down way you could imagine. I mean, he was…I just remember laughing uncontrollably at some of the ways in which Malcolm would answer questions and put down Whites who were trying to trick him at that point. So, he was, he was a new outlet for the anger and the frustration. But he sure was smart. I also remember, I mean, I saw him a number of times after that. I went down to his restaurant in Harlem, and I remember a meal particularly where he chided me for eating white bread. I mean, he told me how [laughs], how useless, and nutritionless, and blanched out this, this thing was. And he gave me a lecture on how one should eat more healthily. In fact I had recalled when I was a little kid I remember having dinner with Mary McLeod Bethune from Benedict College when I was a little, little kid. And I had never seen anybody that proud, [laughs] a Black woman that proud. And I, it was the first time I ever heard, the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice. And that stuck in my head. But Malcolm's lecture on white bread and its nutritionless content stuck with me for many years afterwards.

01:02:58:00

Interviewer #2:

Go back to Mississippi just, just one more time.

Marian Wright Edelman:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

And just, just watching the, the, the traditional movement. The, the, the King dominated movement starts to come apart around the issue of, of, of violence with, with Black participation. You had invested incredible years of your, your life in that. It must have been painful to watch it come to the surface. Or was it a natural consequence?

01:03:26:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

It was very painful to see the divisions between White and Black. Northern White ally and Black leader occur in Mississippi. But some of that is an inevitable part of change. People have different roles at different stages in the movement, and you have to know when to come in and help, and you have to know when to leave in order to help. I remember one day, because there were a number of White friends, John Mud and others. John Mudd who subsequently because a director of the Child Development Group of Mississippi, and the subsequent executive director of CDF, and who was a very good friend of Bob Moses. And Bob Moses, who I think after Dr. King was the second great professional figure of the civil rights movement for me. I mean, absolute integrity, extraordinary courage and is one of the people who kept us all going. And, and in a sense was a real servant leader or a non-leader and who got so upset about the cultism that was developing around him that he began to withdraw and changed his name, as you know. But he was very good friends with John Mudd and with others. But I remember a day in Steven's Kitchen, which was the greasy spoon restaurant next to my law office, which was over a pool hall on Barry Street, when we were eating in there, John Mudd, and I, and I think one other White. And Bob came in, but he wanted to speak to me, but he was not willing to, to deal with the whole table. And then I knew that something very major had passed. It has always been my view. And, you know, you see this old surface argument about desegregation, and, and, and, and helping impact at schools today. That you got to continue to work on both fronts. That you have to got to develop Black leadership. You got to help Black children in those ghetto schools learn how to read and write better than White children 'cause they need to know it more than the White children do because the way that society still is. And you gotta get them in those suburban cities and make sure they know their culture, and, and have good skills. And these both [unintelligible] arguments have to, to give way to dealing with kids wherever they are.

01:05:23:00

Interviewer #2:

Let me jump just for a second.

Marian Wright Edelman:

Go ahead.

Interviewer #2:

Because you were twenty-five, twenty-six years old. And you were getting senators to come to Mississippi to do something. That's…you say it casually, but that's a remarkable thing. What…how in the devil does that work?

01:05:36:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

It doesn't work. I didn't feel getting senators to come to Mississippi was remarkable. I was trying to do my job. It [laughs] never occurred to me that anything I was doing was remarkably. I was simply responding to a need. The only time I find I get in trouble is when I start thinking about what I'm doing and whether or not I'm gonna look good, or whether or not it's gonna get something. You know—

01:05:53:00

Interviewer #2:

But in 1967 and '68, you're, you're, you're mid-twenties. How, how do you make, how can you even talk to us about it?

01:06:01:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Because you have a passion for something, and I have always had a passion for seeing that Blacks and the poor get a fair shake in this society. I cannot stand [laughs] it to see people suffer unnecessarily. And I don't know. It, if you see what needs to be done and you try to say the truth as you see it, I find that people will [phone rings] respond. My daddy used to always say just kinda [phone rings] get on the—sorry, go ahead. I'm not, [laughs] I'm not giving you what you want.

01:06:32:00

Interviewer #2:

It, it, it's just that, that, kids, kids today now say…

Marian Wright Edelman:

It never occurred to me.

Interviewer #2:

—[unintelligible] the movement. And that, [phone rings] they did it back then. And, you know, I couldn't do that.

Interviewer #2:

[phone rings] And I'm, I'm just trying to get a sense of how you did it, you get a senator to pay attention, how you get the country to…

01:06:47:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

In ordinary ways. You just…each of us can make a difference by just simply seeing a need, trying to figure out how you respond to that need. I always used to do my homework carefully. But, you know, and I would follow up and never give up. I mean, getting things done is something that any person can do if they simply believe in something deeply hang in there.

01:07:09:00

Interviewer #2:

How—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer #2:

— did you do it back then?

Marian Wright Edelman:

How did I do it back then? [laughs] How did I do it back then?

Camera Crew Member #1:

We have to change rolls.

Interviewer #2:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[sneezes] [coughs]

Marian Wright Edelman:

Henry, I just never—

Interviewer #2:

I know—

Marian Wright Edelman:

—I was talking to [unintelligible] that I didn't re—

[cut]

[camera roll #4085]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Four, three, five sound.

[slate]

01:07:19:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Did it right.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, thank you.

01:07:22:00

Interviewer #2:

What was it that allowed that generation to play these sophisticated skilled rolls at organizing a social movement?

01:07:33:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

We had a passion in, in the '60s and that generation. I got…we were angry. But we also had a, had been taught by our parents that the world had a lot of things wrong with it and that you were obligated and could change it. And our adults, even though the, all of our lives on the outside were, were, was ugly. You know, told us we were worth, weren't much very, worth very much. Told us that we couldn't, you know, succeed like White children could. Our parents said it wasn't so, and our teachers said it wasn't so. And our preacher said it wasn't so, and we therefore internalized the fact that it wasn't so. And so from the time I was a little girl I was taught that I could change things, and I lived with adults who didn't have a whole lot of money or a lot of education but who made it clear that we could change the world we were in. And so when I went off to Spelman College, and I again heard role models in chapel, we heard everybody. I mean, Martin King was through chapel. You know, Benjamin Mays taught us everything about how to act and how to dress. But the message was that you can do anything. You can be anything as one person. And there was never a time in my life in that segregated prison of a small rural town when I did not know that I was gonna change segregation. And I certainly always knew that I was responsible for helping to change it. And so when the sit-in movement came or when a Martin came to kind of ignite the passions that were already there, I mean, you know…erything is in timing. I mean, I got mad one night when I was freshman in Atlanta. This was in 1956 when I just didn't wanna go get up and go to the back of the bus. And there were endless incidences like that by individual kids or other kids. Spelman girls used to go down to the state legislature once a year just to get thrown out. Just to let 'em know we were there, and we'd come and sit in the galleries. The legislature would stop. They'd tell the marshal to remove those girls. But we were making our point. And so, you know, all of our lives were taught to struggle and taught that we as one person could make a difference. But we saw people making a difference. You know, when I went off to college, there were three or four women in my congregation whom I'm still trying to be as good as. And there were three or four women in Mississippi who were like them that I'm still trying to be as good as. Ms. T. Kelly, Ms. Lucy McQueen, Ms. Nancy Reese, and Miss Kate Winston. [phone rings] These were uneducated women but who were kind to kids. When I [phone rings] went off to Spelman, you know, and they always made me feel that I was gonna get the education they never got. They just sent me these, these shoeboxes full of chicken and greasy dollar [phone rings] bills, and always made it clear that I would make a difference. But, you know, they made a difference in their one-on-one way. And when you saw one little kid down at Spelman or Ruby Doris Smith who went out there to plan a sit-in demonstration, all it takes is caring, determination. It had never occurred to me that I was gonna to law school. Never. Never. I was a pre-med student, and then I was a music major. And one day out of the 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? [laughs] I didn't wanna 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. And so I think it's passion and confidence.

01:11:08:00

Interviewer #2:

Malcolm.

Marian Wright Edelman:

Malcolm.

Interviewer:

Change your life at all?

01:11:16:00

Marian Wright Edelman:

Malcolm had the same kind of audacity that I think I had been taught by adults in very many different ways all of my life. Because again, it had never occurred to me either as a Black or as a woman that I couldn't make a difference or that I couldn't be anything. And Malcolm sort of elevated that to a different level because he was blunt where King was tactful. They were both smart, both extraordinarily eloquent and articulate. He was…he could, he could, he could save the anger while King could, could, could, could do the, the softer encouraging persuasion, pushing, prodding. But, you know, he was a reinforcing person at a different time and at, and, and responded to a different need in us who didn't, 'cause it, you know, it was always hard to try to be half as good as Dr. King. Even though we believed in nonviolence it was also very good [laughs] to have somebody vent the other side. And there always need to be multiple voices with multiple strategies pursuing social change.

01:12:33:00

Interviewer #2:

That's wonderful. [unintelligible]

Marian Wright Edelman:

I petered out. Sorry.

Interviewer #2:

No, that's fine. That's, that's perfect.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer: #2:

You've been a great—

Camera Crew Member #2:

That’s a wrap.

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:12:42:00