

Activist shares message with kids
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ALPINE — A day after voters elected the country's first black president, Marian Wright Edelman told an intimate gathering of 30 at-risk children Wednesday night to absorb one lesson: "Any of us can do or be anything."



Edelman, the civil rights activist who founded the Children's Defense Fund, came to Alpine and the home of comedian Chris Rock and his wife, Malaak Compton-Rock, to visit with children from the Bushwick section of Brooklyn.

The children listened quietly to Edelman after playing with the Rocks' basement pool table and Ms. Pac Man machine and marveling at a mansion the likes of which they had seen only on MTV's "Cribs."

Most had spent two weeks in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August on a volunteering trip sponsored by Compton-Rock's "Journey for Change" program — one of the "Angel Rock" charitable projects that she directs. Edelman told them that the experience should have been a lesson that they can make a difference.

"We're on the verge of another movement," she said, reflecting on the election on Tuesday of Sen. Barack Obama. "And I think young people like you are going to help bring that about. Just know how much power you have to change things."

Compton-Rock introduced Edelman as "my idol," adding that Edelman's lifetime of service was the inspiration for her own charitable work. An Edelman quote — "Service is the rent we pay for living" — is painted on the wall of the basement room where the Rocks' daughters, Lola, 6, and Zahra, 4, play.

Edelman drew from her most recent book, "The Sea Is So Wide and My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation." Parents, she said, should be active in the lives of their children, check up on them often, and let them know they are loved.

Children, she said, should know that they can accomplish anything if they stay in school and work hard enough. The unlikely election of a 47-year-old man with a mixed racial background as the nation's 44th president was a testament to that, she said.

"Dream beyond the moment and look at the things that might be possible," she said. "Dr. King used to say, 'I was sitting in the back of the bus, but my mind was always up front.' Don't let anybody tell you that you can't do it. You aim high and you work very hard and now I think it's clear that you can be anything you want to."

The children listened intently. Many, it seemed, had already learned something about service and accomplishment during their two-week stay in Johannesburg, where they spent their time volunteering in schools, clinics and orphanages in the city's shantytowns.

"At first, I was like, 'South Africa?' " said Sadara Lewis, 13. "I was like, 'Mommy, why are you making me go to South Africa?' But she said it's a good experience. Then when I went, I said, 'Oh, I should have listened to my mother.' I loved it."

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