

## A Strong Voice for our Children

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, June 8, 2005

Every year on Stand for Children Day, Americans gather across the nation for events aimed at giving every child a fair chance. It's not a holiday that appears on most calendars—at least not yet. Jonah Martin Edelman is committed to changing that. And if anyone will succeed, it's Jonah.

His life is a study in helping children. As a student at Yale, Jonah volunteered in the community and taught Danny, a bilingual 6-year old, how to read. "I remember how two or three hours of my time each week made a tremendous difference in Danny's life," he says. From there, his commitment to public service deepened. He's run a teen pregnancy prevention initiative, founded a mentorship program for middle school students, and led an enrichment project for children in public housing. Shifting from direct service to activism, Jonah helped organize Stand for Children Day. On June 1, 1996, more than 300,000 people came to Washington, DC for the largest rally for children in American history. Jonah did all this by the time he was in his mid-20s.

Given his dedication and accomplishments, it should come as no surprise that Jonah's the son of Marian Wright Edelman, head of the Children's Defense Fund and winner of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award. Jonah credits much of his motivation to a trip to the South with his mother, when he was 20. They visited the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, where in 1965 billy clubs and tear gas drove back some 600 civil rights demonstrators. By a fountain at the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, they stood at a cascade of water over a curved black granite wall, carved with words from one of Martin Luther King's favorite Bible-inspired verses. We will not be satisfied, King would say, "...until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Jonah still gets chills when he thinks about that trip. "I'd read about the movement in history books," he recalls, "but now I understand how it became real when ordinary people stood up."

Cultural and political movements don't just happen; neither does change. Plenty of people want to transform the world. The key is engaging them so they're willing to get involved and inspiring them to believe they can make a difference. Real progress happens when a host of disparate voices become one.

“A lot of people want change, want children to have better opportunities. But most don’t know how to solve the problem themselves,” explains Jonah. As co-founder and executive director of Stand for Children ([www.stand.org](http://www.stand.org)), Jonah has the passion, savvy, and commitment to engage people at the grassroots. His membership organization provides the structure, helping people who care about children come together and mobilize for concrete, lasting changes. Currently, “Stand” has chapters in nine states and has celebrated more than 50 state and local victories.

In Massachusetts, Stand successfully spearheaded a campaign to prevent a \$4.2 million budget cut for schools and local services. In Oregon, they played a lead role in the Portland Children’s Initiative, which saved teaching positions, after-school programs, early childhood education, and child abuse prevention projects. And in Tennessee, \$25 million in new investment will give 4,000 more low-income four-year-olds access to pre-K next year.

“Stand for Children shows passionate, committed people how to use the democratic process to get results,” says Jonah. Indeed. The organization stresses the importance of taking action and urges members to contact elected officials from the City Council to the US Senate.

Politicians are listening. Mike Swaim, Mayor of Salem, Oregon, recalls, “Stand for Children does one thing that more volunteer lobbyists fail to do: Ask the decisionmaker for a firm commitment. There I was onstage in front of more than 200 people, being asked, ‘Mayor Swaim, when this comes to a vote, will you vote yes?’ For the decisionmaker, it’s uncomfortable, but it certainly is appropriate—and very effective.” The approach has garnered impressive results—Stand has helped more than 472,000 children in 50 states and secured \$325 million in children and family services.

Jonah Edelman is a focused strategist. Stand for Children has been successful where most grassroots campaigns falter, because Jonah has a gift for seeing beyond the immediate. In years to come, no doubt many more Stand chapters will emerge. And many more calendars will have Stand for Children Day circled on June 1st. I know mine will.