



Tom Olsen, Published January 18 2013

Activist recalls work with Martin Luther King breakfast keynoter

•
•



Marian Wright Edelman

Sue Sojourner hasn't made it to Duluth's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day breakfast for the past few years due to scheduling conflicts. This year, however, she's making sure she clears her schedule.

An old friend and colleague, Marian Wright Edelman, a renowned civil rights leader and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, will be addressing attendees.

"She's compassionate, she's dynamic, she's quite brilliant," said Sojourner, a Duluth artist, writer and civil rights activist. "And everything I'm saying about her has probably already been said by 27,000 other people."

Wright Edelman's speech will be the highlight of the MLK Holiday Community Breakfast held Monday at the First United Methodist Church. She will be addressing a crowd in Minneapolis, and the Duluth crowd will see a large screen simulcast.

The free breakfast begins at 7 a.m. with local presentations to precede Wright Edelman's 8 a.m. address.

Claudie Washington, the president of the Duluth chapter of the NAACP and an organizer of Duluth's Martin Luther King, Jr. events, said Wright Edelman is a perfect fit, given this year's theme of education equity.

"Her message, we hope, will inspire people and let people know how long we've been trying to deal with education equity for people of color," he said. "We hope she'll impress upon us to do a better job than we've done in the past."

Sojourner is quite familiar with Wright Edelman, having rubbed elbows with her while they both worked on civil rights issues, first

in Mississippi and later in Washington, D.C.

"We knew each other and ran in the same circles in the '70s and '80s," Sojourner said. "She was a dynamo, defending people and taking care of things as a lawyer."

Wright Edelman became the first African-American woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar during the 1960s and began working for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in the state.

She later moved to Washington, D.C., where she worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Poor People's Campaign, a grassroots effort to gain economic and human rights for poverty-stricken citizens of all races. The campaign, however, was cut short by the assassinations of King and fellow civil rights activist Robert F. Kennedy, who had helped create the campaign.

But Wright Edelman is most famous for the Children's Defense Fund, an organization she started in 1973 to advocate for a level playing field for all children. She remains president of the organization, which is known for its "Leave No Child Behind" motto.

"She was an astute observer of what was going on in the country and she was changing things herself," Sojourner said. "The Children's Defense Fund was pretty revolutionary."

The organization received much national attention during the 1990s, thanks to then first lady Hillary Clinton, who had been involved with the organization since its early years. Today the Children's Defense Fund has offices in 24 states, and advocates for numerous issues including increased school funding, stronger gun control laws and involvement in faith-based programs.

Sojourner has had less frequent contact with Wright Edelman over the years. She eventually moved to Duluth in 1996 and continues to work with civil rights issues, particularly as a photographer and writer. She still has fond memories of working alongside Wright Edelman.

"One of my warmest memories is that she was fascinated by the fact that my husband and I changed our last names to 'Sojourner'," said Sojourner, who was known as Sue Lorenzi until changing her name in 1972 to honor 19th century abolitionist and women's rights leader

Sojourner Truth. "She always remembered that and just called me 'Sojourner.'"

Washington said he hopes to continue a tradition of having attendees set goals for the year, after viewing the local program and hearing Wright Edelman speak.

“Part of the event is to renew your commitment to civil rights,” he said. “We want people to write down their goals for the next year, for how they’re going to engage civil rights issues.”

WHO: Marian Wright Edelman, civil rights leader and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund

WHAT: MLK Holiday Community Breakfast, featuring a speech by Wright Edelman

WHEN: Monday, Jan. 21. Breakfast and local presentations begin at 7 a.m., with a simulcast of Wright Edelman’s speech at 8 a.m.

WHERE: First United Methodist Church, 230 E. Skyline Parkway

COST: Free