Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), has been an advocate for disadvantaged Americans for her entire professional life. A graduate of Spelman College and Yale Law School, Edelman began her career in the mid-1960s when, as the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, she directed the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi. In 1968, she moved to Washington, DC, as counsel for the Poor People's Campaign that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began organizing before his death. She founded the Washington Research Project, a public interest law firm and the parent body of the Children's Defense Fund. For two years she served as the Director of the Center for Law and Education at Harvard University and in 1973 began CDF.

Edelman served on the Board of Trustees of Spelman College, which she chaired from 1976 to 1987, and was the first woman elected by alumni as a member of the Yale University Corporation. She has received many honorary degrees and awards including the Albert Schweitzer Humanitarian Prize, the Heinz Award, and a MacArthur Foundation Prize Fellowship. In 2000, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award, and the Robert F. Kennedy Lifetime Achievement Award for her writings, which include eight books.

She is a board member of the Robin Hood Foundation, the Association to Benefit Children, and City Lights School and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. She is married to Peter Edelman, a Professor at Georgetown Law School; they have three sons, two granddaughters, and two grandsons.