

## A concrete way to remember and honor Nelson Mandela

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
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Last month, all across the world people joined together to mourn former South African president and freedom fighter Nelson Mandela. There was a deep shared sense of loss at the passing of one of the rare human beings who truly helped change the world. He suffered extraordinary hardships, spent 27 years in prison, including 18 on Robben Island under the harshest conditions, and walked out ramrod straight, unbowed, full of a spirit of reconciliation, and offering a hand of peace and hope. He became the first Black President of his country and transformed the way we view leadership and our individual human ability to make the impossible possible.

One of his legacies we can help realize and sustain is the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, whose mission is building a child rights movement and changing the way South Africa treats children and youths. Their work includes supporting children orphaned by the AIDS pandemic, empowering children with disabilities, and promoting youth leadership: "Nelson's Mandela's last wish was to build a children's hospital in Johannesburg to serve all children of southern Africa regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or ability to pay. The Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital (NMCH) will be Mr. Mandela's legacy and live by his creed that 'a society's soul is revealed by how it treats its children.'" I hope we all support this fund and hospital campaign.

In his acceptance speech after being awarded the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, he said this about the promise of a new South Africa: "At the southern tip of the continent of Africa, a rich reward [is] in the making, an invaluable gift is in the preparation for those who suffered in the name of all humanity when they sacrificed everything . . . This reward will not be measured in money. Nor can it be reckoned in the collective price of the rare metals and precious stones that rest in the bowels of the African soil we tread in the footsteps of our ancestors. It will and must be measured by the happiness and welfare of the children, at once the most vulnerable citizens in any society and the greatest of our treasures. The children must, at last, play in the open veld, no longer tortured by the pangs of hunger or ravaged by disease or threatened with the scourge of ignorance, molestation and abuse." His commitment as a leader to South Africa's children was the extension of a principle that has governed leaders of traditional communities for generations: If the children are well, then all of us are well.

In his Presidential inaugural address President Mandela expanded on his simple vision for all of South Africa's families: "Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work,

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bread, water and salt for all. Let each know that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfill themselves." President Mandela's words echo Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Nobel Peace Prize speech where Dr. King said: "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits," words now etched in stone on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C.

In September 2013, a statue of Nelson Mandela was unveiled in front of the South African Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington. Close by on the same Avenue is a beautiful statue of Mahatma Gandhi. Amidst all the monuments to wars and military leaders in our nation's capital, we now have lasting testaments to three great prophets of nonviolence and peace to guide our actions at this inflection point in our nation's and world's history.

The lives of Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela show us what is possible. Let's don't just celebrate and mourn them. Let's follow them.

*Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).*