As we all look to a new year and pause to remember the highlights of the last one, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is reflecting on a major milestone: 2008 marked our 35th anniversary. In October, we celebrated with a special event at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Friends of CDF from across the country and all walks of life came together to celebrate our accomplishments and rededicate our efforts to guarantee a brighter future for America's children.

The event included hosts former CDF board chair Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, CDF board member Malaak Compton-Rock, actress Jurnee Smollett, opera singer Jessye Norman, ABC News anchor George Stephanopoulos, Editor Emeritus of Essence® award-winning a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, and Impact Repertory Theatre. The real stars of the evening, though, were the Katrina Children's Choir. It was a moving, inspiring evening and a chance to look back on where we've been and ahead to where we're going. magazine Susan L. Taylor, actress and comedienne Ali Wentworth, singer and actress Holly Robinson Peete and a special video tribute from actor Sidney Poitier. Performers included renowned teenaged pianist Peng-Peng Gong, Broadway Kids, singer N'Kenge, Grammy

CDF grew out of the legacy of the Poor People's Campaign that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was planning when he was assassinated. Our parent organization was the Washington Research Project, a nonprofit organization founded to monitor federal programs for low-income families. At the time, America was waking up to the voices of Blacks, Latinos, women, and others to whom society previously turned its back. CDF was born to give voice to those who had neither been seen nor heard—all of America's children, especially poor, minority and disabled children left behind in our rich nation.

Since then we have worked tirelessly to ensure a level playing field for all children. We champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty; protect them from abuse and neglect; and secure their access to health care, quality education, and a moral and spiritual foundation. We have never taken government funding. Instead, supported by foundation and corporate grants and individual donations, CDF provides an independent advocacy voice to insist that our nation makes children a priority.

We have been at the forefront of successful efforts to develop policies and programs and to pass legislation that improves children's lives, from the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act creating a federal right to education for disabled children, to the 1997 bipartisan Hatch-Kennedy child health bill, which provided health coverage for 6 million uninsured children.

In addition to our national headquarters in Washington, D.C., CDF bought Alex Haley's Farm in Clinton, TN, as our vibrant movement building and leadership development school for the next generation of servant-leaders and advocates for children and families. A majority of our resources go to state offices across the country to augment and build strong networks for national and state policies. CDF Freedom Schools® sites , which grew out of our Black Community Crusade for Children® Initiative, offer a unique vision of education, which empowers our children to make a difference and to be active citizens. This program has touched the lives of more than 70,000 children and families since 1995. Former CDF board members, alumni, interns and the 12,000-plus youth leaders we have trained serve at the highest levels in academia, the private sector, advocacy and service institutions across our nation.

We are grateful to those who have helped us achieve various gains for children over the last 35 years. But we must also continue to move purposefully forward because there is so much to be done. Nine million children lack health coverage ; more than 13 million children live in poverty ; and a cradle to prison pipeline threatens to resegregate America and undermine the hard earned progress of the last half century. Our nation spends more each year to house a single prisoner than to educate a child.

President-elect Obama's historic victory has brought a new season of hope to our country. CDF looks forward to working with the Obama Administration and the new Congress to enact policies that give all children the chance to live and learn and succeed in life. I thank our dedicated staff and the many thousands of supporters around the country who are working to protect America's children. We have much work ahead of us to prepare our children for the future.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose new book is The Sea is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation , is president of the Children's Defense Fund . CDF's Leave No Child Behind® mission focuses on ensuring every child a Health 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.