

“We Have Decided to Turn the Pain into Power”

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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When Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin's mother, spoke at the Children's Defense Fund's recent national conference, she shared some details about her son that reminded the audience both how special Trayvon was to his family and at the same time how much the happy, social high school student was like any mother's child. "He was very affectionate. He loved to hug and kiss us at 17. He was still a loving teenager . . . He liked to go to the movies. He liked to go to the mall. He liked to dress nice. He had to smell good. He used to talk on the phone all the time with the girls . . . He was just a loving guy. He loved sports. He loved the outdoors. If he was in this room right now, he would be walking around talking to a lot of you right now."

Trayvon's February fatal shooting after he was targeted by self-appointed neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman for looking "no good" while walking home carrying a bag of Skittles and a bottle of iced tea angered and saddened millions of people. For Sybrina and Tracy Martin, Trayvon's father, the personal devastation at losing their 17-year-old son that way was unimaginable. But his mother emphasized their family's determination to do something positive with their loss: "We have decided to turn the hurt and the pain into power . . . Trust me. It hurts. It hurts. But what we need to do is we need to get the message out to you, and that's why it's important for us to speak out. And that's why it's important for us to talk to you now, so that there is not another statistic like Trayvon Martin."

Trayvon's parents and Benjamin Crump, the family's attorney, all spoke at CDF's National and Racial Healing Town Hall. They joined other parents who also have lost children to violence and decided to turn their pain into positive action. The Martins and Mr. Crump spoke about their commitment to justice for Trayvon in order to make sure his death was not in vain—and why justice for Trayvon matters not just for the Martins' child, but for all of our children.

Trayvon's father shared a story about how Trayvon had helped save his life during a fire in the family's kitchen when he was just eight years old. Of course, there was nothing Tracy Martin could do in return the night his son was chased down by Zimmerman out on patrol with his gun. As he told the story he was overwhelmed with grief, but he was also determined to keep striving towards something positive, no matter how difficult it seemed: "We never envision as parents burying your children . . . but in doing so and seeing how communities have come together and stand united in the fight for justice with us, it teaches us a very strong lesson. And I think that lesson is stand up for what you believe in, and when you stand up for what you believe in, others will stand with you . . . We could have easily just opted out to rant, rave, and just had the nation in an uproar, but we chose to do what we felt was right for our son, and that was to keep his legacy going, not let his name be in vain, not let his death be in vain. And I think that was very important . . . You just have to take that loss, take that negative, and turn it into a positive."

Benjamin Crump, the family's attorney, put the Martins' crusade in a larger context. He said earlier that day a reporter had called him because that date would have been Emmett Till's 71st birthday, and the reporter was interested in the connections between Trayvon's death and Emmett's brutal 1955 murder at age 14. It was something Crump had been thinking about: "I've been talking a lot as a legal representative about Emmett Till's death almost 60 years ago and Trayvon Martin, and how far have we come in America in reference to equal justice. Can everybody in America get equal justice? . . . [Supreme Court Justice] Thurgood Marshall said that the basis of the American Constitution is this: A baby born to [a Black mother] in a state like

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Mississippi has the same exact rights as a baby born to the wealthiest, most educated, articulate White woman . . . just by merely drawing its first breath in America. Now, Justice Marshall said, I know that isn't true yet, but I challenge anybody for saying that's not a goal worth fighting for, and I challenge anybody to say that is not what makes America the greatest country in the world. And getting justice for Trayvon Martin, equal justice—the Martins don't want anything but equal justice, simple justice—getting that justice, we help America live up to its creed."

Crump concluded: "We were doing an interview right before we came here with a reporter from France, and the reporter asked, 'Can't Blacks and minorities in America get justice? Can they get justice?' And this is what the world is asking, and I said to her, 'Yes, we can. I believe in my heart we can get justice, but we have to work for it.'"

Those of us who stood with and supported the Martins as they struggled to turn their own pain into power are willing to do that work. The goal of equal rights, equal justice, and equal opportunity for every child in America may not have been realized yet, but it's still the goal we have to meet in order for America to finally live up to its promise. Let's all make sure that happens in Trayvon's case.

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