

Judge Patricia Martin: Why Family Matters

The Honorable Patricia Martin, who serves as the Presiding Judge of the Child Protection Division of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois, is the president-elect of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. In this key role she is devoted to helping change children's lives. She previously chaired the Supreme Court of Illinois Judicial Conference Study Committee on Juvenile Justice, and spent a decade as an assistant Cook County Public Defender. With her wealth of experience, Judge Martin is a wise observer of what works best in the court system for children and families. As National Child Abuse Prevention Month comes to a close, here are some critical lessons she shared with the Children's Defense Fund's Black Community Crusade for Children.

The first key lesson is that families matter. Even when families have become involved in the family court



CHILD WATCH
Marian Wright Edelman

ing their children even when abuse or neglect has occurred.

In her second key lesson, Judge Martin stressed that parents are by no means the only source of support and influence on children. When parents aren't available, it's critical to find other adults to step up in a child's life because one adult can make all the difference. Judge Martin told us about the aunt who played that role for her and her younger siblings after their mother's death. She said the day their mother passed away "I couldn't figure out how we were going to get out of bed the next day, literally, because when we were home, the way we woke up, my mother would sing "Precious Lord" down the hallway... That was the way

I have the responsibility of helping them find their goals, dreams, and aspirations, helping them learn their yes." She established the nationally recognized Benchmark Permanency Hearing Program giving foster care teens approaching emancipation the opportunity to express their goals directly to the court. She shared the example of one young woman who came to her courtroom with paperwork that said she wanted to be a cosmetologist. When Judge Martin probed the girl herself about her plans, this

young teen didn't know what a cosmetologist was. After Judge Martin explained that it involved hairstyling and beauty products, she said, "Judge, I hate

level that encouraging her to be a lawyer would be completely unrealistic. Judge Martin immediately replied, "Sir, you've come to the wrong place."

one of us can and must follow her good example. Children in every community need just one adult to step up and be an Aunt Kitty in their lives: to care about what they're doing, encourage their dreams, and tell anyone who tries to stifle that child's star that they have come to the wrong place.

Marian Wright Edelman is a lifelong advocate for disadvantaged Americans and is the President of CDF. Under her leadership, CDF has become the nation's strongest voice for children and families.

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doing that stuff. I want to be a lawyer." The girl's caseworker tried to tell Judge Martin that the girl was reading so far below grade

I am so grateful for Judge Martin's caring leadership and work, which has made such a difference in the lives of so many children. Every

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system it's still important for parents to be encouraged to participate in their children's lives. Instead of focusing on parents' absence because of abuse, neglect, or incarceration, she said, it's more helpful to focus on finding ways these parents can be positively involved. Rather than thinking about reunifying families down the road as a primary goal of the family court system, she starts by thinking about how to keep families together.

"Even if I have to take a child into foster care that does not preclude great family involvement. It takes more effort to do it, but that doesn't preclude it. As a matter of fact, we should do it better and more often if a child is in custody, in my humble opinion." Judge Martin pointed out that methods like court-supervised family time or video conferencing for incarcerated parents and their children can allow parents who may still be working on changing their own lives and behavior to stay connected and have a positive impact on their children's lives.

Judge Martin developed the Child Protection Mediation Program now used in a number of jurisdictions, which includes parents in decisions impact-

we woke up every day when we were home, and so I couldn't figure out how that was going to happen. [But] my Aunt Katherine—we call her "Aunt Kitty"—she came to our house that next morning after my mother died at six o'clock, and from that day to last September 31st, when she passed, every morning at six a.m., I got a call from my Aunt Kitty. Now, [even] if I was in Australia, six o'clock Chicago time, Aunt Kitty called, and she asked the same thing: "What did you do? What are you doing today? And how do you feel?"... My theory is if I had an Aunt Kitty who called me at six o'clock, every one of my children in foster care deserves an Aunt Kitty."

Judge Martin said she's seen many kinds of adults stepping in to play this role for children—"the basketball coach, the math teacher"—and whenever she prepared children in her caseload to leave foster care, she held meetings with these adults too. She wanted to remind "every adult who is responsible for shining that child's star" how critical they were in the child's life. Judge Martin eagerly embraced the chance to do her part for children: "I am an adult, and



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