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COMMITTED

After Two Tragedies, a Love to Bring Down Barriers

By Penelope Green

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When Marian Wright and Peter Edelman married in July 1968, their wedding was like an armistice. In April, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated; two months later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was murdered — on June 6, Mrs. Edelman's birthday. For years afterward, the couple would spend that day at Arlington Cemetery. The national tragedies were personal for the couple: Mrs. Edelman had worked for Dr. King, and Mr. Edelman had been an aide to the senator.

The New York Times covered the wedding as a news story, sending Nan Robertson, then a reporter for the paper's Washington bureau. The ceremony was held on the lawn at the home of their friend, Adam Walinsky, a speechwriter for Senator Kennedy, in McLean, Va. The choice to marry in Virginia was deliberate: A year earlier, the state's law against interracial marriage had been struck down in a suit brought by Richard and Mildred Loving. The Edelmans were the third interracial couple to marry there after the Lovings prevailed.

"I hate barriers," Mrs. Edelman said. "And it was a time to bring down barriers."



The Edelmans were the third interracial couple to marry in Virginia. Capitol and Glogau

Theirs was a kind of royal wedding, the beginning of one of the most notable partnerships of the civil rights era and beyond. Mrs. Edelman would soon found the Children's Defense Fund, now in its 43rd year. She would also hire a young Hillary Rodham, just out of law school.

Now a professor at Georgetown University, Mr. Edelman would continue to work in law and policy. He was a high official at the Department of Health and Human Services during Bill Clinton's first term as president. In 1996, the Edelman-Clinton friendship would publicly sour when President Clinton signed the welfare reform act of 1996; Mr. Edelman resigned in protest, and both he and Mrs. Edelman wrote articles denouncing the law. Yet in November it was at a Children's Defense Fund dinner where Mrs. Clinton

made her first public appearance after conceding the election, to thank her mentor for a lifetime of inspiration. “If there’s anyone who knows how to pick yourself up and get back on your feet and get back to work,” she said, “it is Marian.”

In spring 1967, Mrs. Edelman was a 28-year-old civil rights lawyer, the first African-American woman admitted to the Mississippi bar, a liaison to Dr. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organizer at Head Start and counsel for Dr. King’s Poor People’s Campaign. She had testified before a Senate subcommittee on how the War on Poverty was working in the Southern States, and had invited the senators to come see for themselves.



The Edelmans at their home in Washington. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Mr. Edelman, then 29, was sent ahead to Jackson, Miss., where her law offices were, to plan the trip for Senator Kennedy. She took his phone call, but said she was too busy writing a brief to meet in person. “But you’ve got to eat dinner!” Mr. Edelman insisted, and she relented.

She was Southern born, educated at Spelman College in Atlanta and at Yale Law School; he was from Minnesota, a Harvard man. After dinner, they talked until midnight.

What Senator Kennedy would see on that trip would change history: ragged, starving children; babies too malnourished to move; the hollow faces of the hungry poor all through the Mississippi Delta, too destitute to pay the \$2 a day that food stamps then cost. Now the program is free.

“I couldn’t think of a better time to have grown up,” Mrs. Edelman said. “I feel so lucky.”

The Edelmans faced none of the struggles of the Lovings, she added. “It was another era. We were past that time.” Their challenges were more quotidian: balancing work and family.

The couple have three sons. Jonah Edelman and Joshua Edelman are education advocates; Ezra Edelman is a director and producer, whose most recent film is “O.J.: Made in America,” the nearly eight-hour documentary that was recently nominated for an Oscar.

“I’m so proud of them,” Mrs. Edelman said. “I’m most proud I kept them out of law school.”

Mr. Edelman said, “I don’t agree with that!”



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“Good marriages are hard to develop and maintain,” Mrs. Edelman said. “We got married when the roles of men and women were changing, and I moved with Peter twice. How do you nurture your professional passions while trying to make sure you’re good parents? If I had any advice to give, I’d say:, ‘Try not to be a superwoman, and try to be honest. Talk to each other in ways you can be heard and not be angry.’”

As for the wedding announcement, Mrs. Edelman said she was stunned to see it in the paper. “I don’t remember Nan being there. And there’s one mistake. It was my brother, Harry Wright, who escorted me, not my brother-in-law.”

It’s probably too late to issue a correction.

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Correction: February 6, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated the location of Marian Wright Edelman’s office in 1967. It was in Jackson, Miss., not Cleveland, Miss. We also misstated Peter Edelman’s role with the Department of Health and Human Services. He was a high official, not counsel. Further, Marian Wright Edelman was a liaison to Dr. King, not a congressional liaison.

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