

## 2003 Children's Champion Awards

*Child* salutes six men and women who are truly making a difference for the next generation.

By Nina Willdorf



Michael Collopy

### Marian Wright Edelman

**Honored for:** Working tirelessly to help a population that needs it most: disadvantaged youth. In 1973, Edelman started the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), a nonprofit in Washington, DC, devoted exclusively to promoting kids' interests through fundraising, advocacy, and lobbying.

**How and why she got started:** The day after Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, Edelman, a lawyer, found herself trying to talk a group of teens out of looting and rioting. She failed but, instead of giving in to despair herself, was spurred to action by the teenagers' hopeless, desperate response. Today she spearheads programs fighting everything from teen pregnancy to kids in poverty.

**Biggest frustration:** "The hypocrisy of our nation, which says we believe in children, yet we don't invest in them."

**What keeps her going:** "I grew up in a family that lived what they preached," says Edelman, the daughter of a Baptist minister. "My life has been shaped out of that tradition of faith and community engagement."

**Project in the pipeline:** Her priority is safeguarding Head Start, a 25-year-old program that helps children in poor families with all aspects of school readiness. The program may be moved from federal to state control, putting it at increased risk for funding cuts. Says Edelman: "We're fighting that tooth and nail."

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## Mel Levine, M.D.

**Honored for:** His innovative work in evaluating children with learning, developmental, and behavioral problems. In 1995, Dr. Levine founded All Kinds of Minds, a nonprofit institute at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The institute educates teachers, conducts research, and provides resources and information to help kids with learning disabilities. This is a topic Dr. Levine, director of the university's Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning, explores in his bestselling books *A Mind at a Time* and *The Myth of Laziness*.

**How and why he got started:** Over the years, Dr. Levine grew increasingly troubled as he watched children who were struggling in school get labeled and become discouraged. Kids can easily start to think of themselves as losers and give up, he says: "I felt that many approaches being used in schools were potentially harmful and didn't take into account the children's strengths." Driven by indignation, he began to research the different ways the brain acquires information.

**What keeps him going:** Dr. Levine gets periodic updates from the thousands of now-grown kids he maintains contact with, such as AJ, a boy who had difficulties with memory and language processing. Passionate about cars and racing, AJ, with the help of Dr. Levine, learned to read by poring over car manuals. Now the boy who once had trouble reading is a young man who loves to study books about cars and is successful in a related field: He operates his own car dealership.

**Project in the pipeline:** All Kinds of Minds recently won a contract to train New York City public school teachers to better understand and accommodate students' learning differences.

## Andrea Alstrup

**Honored for:** Founding the Family Friendly Programming Forum (FFPF), which offers financial support to TV networks to create shows parents will want to watch with their kids. The consortium of more than 40 advertisers also sponsors a script development fund, doling out scholarships to universities to encourage screenwriting students to write scripts appropriate for families.

**How and why she got started:** "It was 1998, *South Park* was hot, *Friends* was popular, and it was just one sex joke after another," says Alstrup. "I think there's a time and place for that, but not at 8 o'clock at night." As corporate vice president of advertising for Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick, NJ, Alstrup organized a conference to address the dearth of family-friendly programs; out of that meeting, the idea for FFPF was born. "I want to be proud of the place where my company's advertising runs," Alstrup says. More important, she wants to increase television viewing options for families: "It's our collective responsibility to expose children to the brighter side of life."

**Favorite feat:** You can thank the FFPF for *Gilmore Girls*, *8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter*, *American Dreams*, and this season's *All About the Andersons*.

**Guiding principle:** Alstrup aims to promote shows that prompt discussions like the ones she had with her kids in front of the TV. She knows that it's much harder to be educational, entertaining, and appropriate for families than simply to be edgy. But it's a goal she believes in personally and professionally: "I feel passionate that there have to be more alternatives."

## Júlio T. Leitão



Patrick Demarchelier

**Honored for:** Being the creative force behind Batoto Yetu, an African dance troupe in Harlem that he founded for children ages 3 and up. Its mission is to raise kids' self-esteem and pride in their heritage through song, dance, and storytelling.

**How and why he got started:** Born in Angola, Leitão was forced to leave his country as a child in 1975 when civil war broke out. He eventually came to the U.S. as a young adult to study at the Dance Theatre of Harlem. That in itself was a big accomplishment, but it wasn't enough for Leitão, who was drawn to work with children.

While teaching African dance to adults at the National Black Theater in New York City, Leitão noticed kids peering into the studio with interest. So he headed to a playground and started instructing neighborhood kids for free. As word spread, Batoto Yetu (Swahili for "our children") began performing in theaters.

Today, Leitão has introduced similar programs across the world, from Oklahoma to Indonesia. "If we want to strengthen our community, we have to start by unifying our people in such a way that they become proud of who they are," he says.

**Favorite feat:** Returning to Angola two years ago with Batoto Yetu to perform for the president. "We sang and danced, and the audience took over in joy," he recalls.

**Guiding principle:** "I believe that individuals can make a difference," says Leitão. Fostering children's sense of community and self-worth is apparently resonating: Though he intends the troupe to be for children ages 3 to 18, "there are some who are 20 who just don't want to leave," he says proudly.



Ken Velasquez

## Wendy Kopp

**Honored for:** Giving national service a whole new meaning by matching the needs of young adults with those of children who have little access to a quality education. In 1990, Kopp founded Teach for America, a New York City-based nonprofit that places recent college graduates in some of the country's poorest rural and urban public schools for two years.

**How and why she got started:** While a student at Princeton University, Kopp was struck by the disparities between those who came from privileged and poor communities. At the same time, Kopp noticed her fellow undergraduates searching for something meaningful to do after college.

She proposed an idea in her senior thesis for mobilizing the most promising and brightest recent college graduates to teach kids in need. Teach for America moved from the page into practice after her graduation, launching in six locations with 500 recruits. Now some 3,200 educators teach in 20 communities. Since its inception, more than 10,000 young adults have worked with 1.5 million students.

**Guiding principle:** "The quality of education you receive has so much to do with your chance in life," says Kopp, who now has two sons, ages 3 and 1. "There are children who go on to college because of a teacher they had in elementary school."

## Margaret Mikol



Josh Titus

**Honored for:** Bringing hope to parents of chronically ill children. In 1983, Mikol founded Sick Kids Need Involved People (SKIP), a nonprofit organization that guides New York State parents through the red tape of attaining necessary services for their children.

**How and why she got started:** Mikol and her husband, Yves, lost two children who were both born with Severe Combined Immuno Deficiency, a genetic condition that left them without immune systems. (They now have a healthy 18-year-old son, Jonathan.) "Julia was my Ph.D.," says Mikol of her second-born, a daughter who lived to be 7 ½. When Julia was in the hospital, Mikol tried to learn everything she could about her daughter's condition and asked lots of questions.

After extensive research, Mikol discovered that a waiver would make Julia eligible for Medicaid, enabling them to finance her care at home rather than in a hospital setting. Mikol fought for the waiver and won. "Julia was the first child out of a hospital on a ventilator in New York," she says.

What started as a personal quest quickly became political and public when Mikol eagerly began sharing her knowledge. "Our original intent was to just get the information into people's hands," she says. "But parents told us they needed partners to navigate the system. Without people who are really willing to get involved, it's impossible." So Mikol began helping on a larger scale.

**What she learned:** "I had to change my personality to get my child what she needed most," says Mikol. "To me, the medical world was not something you challenged. Now I'm vocal and obnoxious."

**Ultimate goal:** To whittle SKIP's "humongous" wait list until there are no more children on it. Says Mikol: "The happiest day for me will be when people don't need us anymore."