

CHILD WATCH

By **Marian Wright Edelman**
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Making Leaders of Young Black Women

As adults, we need to let our children know that they can and should aim high. Young black girls especially must know that they can become leaders. They need to be exposed to black women in their communities who are powerful in a range of professions; business, politics, law, medicine, the church, or the arts, science and mathematics.

Just as important, young black girls need to know **how** they can become leaders: the qualities and traits that will help them overcome the difficult odds posed by their race and gender. They can get some expert "how-to" advice on this topic from black women leaders themselves in a survey conducted last year for the National Coalition of 100 Black Women by pollster Louis Harris. Here is what these successful women said about what it takes to be a leader:



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— *Communicate clearly.* 90% of the women polled felt that it is "very essential" to be articulate in speeches and conversation.

— *Be your own person.* Two-thirds of the women believed that to be seen as independent is "very essential" to being a leader.

— *Form a network.* Black

women leaders put a higher priority than other leaders in the poll on giving and getting information from their peers.

— *Make allies among the powerful.* Black women on their way up have found that this is a key to overcoming opposition to their leadership.

— *Be motivated.* The women reported that what keeps them going are three major motivations: making their organization much more successful, needing the approval and respect of their peers, and having an important impact on the outside world.

Young black girls starting out in life should remember that there is no quick fix to getting power or a leadership position. It will take time, patience and hard work. But successful black women have identified three key qualities that can help along the way:

— Strong interpersonal

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THE ROBERTSON STORY—PART II

"No one should have to live like this." That's what Mrs. Robertson kept saying. It explains why she and her family kept fighting the racist element on her block in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn, New York. It also explains why that block has begun to change. The Robertsons' story is the story of a family that wouldn't give up. Even when the bureaucracy wouldn't work. Even when the Robertsons felt like they were living through World War III.

We told you in a previous commentary about some of the racist violence to which the Robertsons were subjected. We told only part of that story. We mentioned, for example, that one of the Robertsons' sons — Dario, who was 13 at the time — was the victim of police brutality. He was running to an after-school program when he was halted at gunpoint by white police officers. When his teachers tried to intervene, the officers cursed them. The false charges against the young man were soon dropped.

What we didn't mention then, however, was that the Robertsons filed a complaint

skills:

- Solid experience, and
- Higher education.

In the poll, black women expressed low confidence in the leadership of key institutions in this nation, most notably the federal government's executive branch. One way we can begin to strengthen our faith in our government is by encouraging and guiding the next generation of black women into more positions of power.

with New York City's Civilian Complaint Reivew Board against the police. They did so even though one officer openly told Mrs. Robertson that their complaint would only "cause trouble."

What became of their complaint? Nothing. Oh, the Robertsons received a letter, all right. The letter said the complaint had been referred to a commanding officer who would investigate the case. The commander was to then submit his findings to the review board the family would be contacted. In other words, a police officer would investigate his fellow officers on a police brutality charge and then present a supposedly unbiased finding. If you believe that, I've got a bridge I'd like to sell you. But, that doesn't really matter because no one ever contacted the Robertsons again. That was back in 1981. Maybe the Review Board is still investigating.

Then, when the family moved into their present home, 7 years ago, they became the target of constant racist violence. They were the first African American family on the block.

And the violence continues. Recently the school bus used to transport racial and ethnic students to a previously all-white junior high was attacked. Four vanloads of young white men ambushed the bus and began smashing it with bricks and bats. Ruti, the Robinsons' 13-year old son, was on that bus. A few weeks later, a racial blow-up at a nearby school — which Ruti will attend in September — made the headlines.

But even in the midst of this racist environment, the buds of change are beginning to bloom. Two months ago Mrs. Robertson, with her 2-year old son in her arms, began going house to house. Many of the older, more racist neighbors had moved away. In addition, some racial and ethnic families had begun to move in. Mrs. Robertson began to organize. She told her neighbors that they needed a new block association — one that would work for everyone. One that would really improve the block. She also reminded them that the old block association was not active. At the first meeting of this new association over 100 people showed up. The group was equally mixed: black and brown and white. They discussed how to make their block better. They volunteered to be block captains. And then they elected Mrs. Robertson president of the new block association — unanimously.

Nothing will ever stop the Robertsons from remaining vigilant. They know the battle is not yet won. As Mrs. Robertson says, "There can be no compromise on the wrongs that were done to my family." But the Robertsons and all those who came to the meeting of the new block association are tired of things the way they were.

It all started because the Robertson family made up its mind, as they said, that "It just isn't right. No one should have to live this way." And then they determined to work to change things.

This is Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. of the United Church of Christ for the Civil Rights Journal.

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