

Children's advocate urges all to strive to improve kids' lives

By BEVERLY BARTLETT
The Courier-Journal

Even as she reeled off statistics about the plight of the poor, even as she criticized the changes made in federal welfare law, even as she questioned the nation's generosity and fairness — Marian Wright Edelman said yesterday that there's much to be optimistic about.

Edelman, a nationally known civil-rights advocate and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, spoke to about 200 people yesterday after receiving an honorary degree at the University of Louisville.

"I don't know when I've seen so many good people trying to do good things," she said of those who work with children.

Edelman said every American has a responsibility to work for true welfare reform, which she described as affordable child care for working families, better prenatal care and medical insurance for every child.

Edelman's speech was part of U of L's first celebration of Founders' Day — the day in 1798 when eight people issued a call for donations to create the old Jefferson Seminary. U of L was founded in 1846, but it traces its roots to the seminary and will begin marking its 200th birthday in the fall.

President John W. Shumaker said Founders' Day will become an annual spring event. Many of the events normally held as part of U of L's commencement ceremony eventually will move to Founders' Day.

Edelman, who spoke at the School of Music, received a standing ovation. She told a story about Sojourner



BY PAM SPAULDING, THE C-J

Marian Wright Edelman, left, talked with Minx Auerbach, U of L board of trustees chairwoman.

Truth, a freed slave who lectured against slavery in the mid-1800s. Truth was once heckled by a man who said he thought as much of her as he did of a flea bite, Edelman said.

Edelman said Truth responded: "That's OK. Lord willing, I'm going to keep you scratching."

Nicole Gaines, a graduate student at U of L's Kent School of Social Work, said Edelman's speech inspired her.

Gaines said many of her fellow students feel overwhelmed by the changes in welfare reform, which they believe will make their efforts to help people more difficult.

But Edelman's speech reminded her that one person can make a difference. "You just have to be a little flea, and if there are enough fleas then the big dog can get uncomfortable," Gaines said.