

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**MEDIA ADVISORY**

**Jurnee Smollett-Bell and Byron Pitts to Host  
25<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary of Children's Defense Fund Beat the Odds® Program  
At the Newseum with Marian Wright Edelman and Donna Shalala**

**Washington, D.C.** — This Thursday, November 5<sup>th</sup> at 8:00 p.m. the Children's Defense Fund 2015 Beat the Odds® Celebration will be held in the Annenberg Theater at the Newseum in Washington, D.C. Award-winning actress and member of the Children's Defense Fund Board of Directors, Jurnee Smollett-Bell will co-host with Emmy Award-winning journalist Byron Pitts, co-anchor of ABC's *Nightline*. Notable presenters and speakers include Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund; Donna Shalala, president of the Clinton Global Initiative; Rev. Dr. Bernard Richardson, Dean of the Chapel at Howard University; and Romulus Johnson, *Beat the Odds* alumni from first ceremony 25 years ago in Los Angeles. Five extraordinary high school seniors from the greater metropolitan area of Washington, D.C. will be honored with an award, a \$10,000 scholarship, CDF leadership training and a laptop computer. Each one has a story to share of overcoming adversity including poverty to excel academically and give back to the community with the help of at least one caring adult. Short bios below.

- Who:** **Marian Wright Edelman**, President of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF)  
**Jurnee Smollett-Bell**, Actress and Activist, member of CDF Board of Directors  
**Byron Pitts**, Co-Anchor of ABC's *Nightline*  
**Donna Shalala**, President of the Clinton Global Initiative  
**Rev. Dr. Bernard Richardson**, Dean of the Chapel, Howard University  
**Romulus Johnson**, Senior Regional Attorney for F.D.I.C., *Beat the Odds* Alumni
- What:** **25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the Children's Defense Fund *Beat the Odds* Program**
- Where:** **Newseum**, Annenberg Theater  
555 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20001
- When:** Thursday, November 5, 2015  
6:30 p.m. Dinner Reception, 8:00 p.m. Celebration, 9:30 p.m. Dessert Reception
- RSVP:** [phassler@childrensdefense.org](mailto:phassler@childrensdefense.org)  
Patti Hassler, Vice President of Communications and Outreach

**Shawná Harris-Lenoir**

Thurgood Marshall Academy • Washington, DC • GPA: 3.99

Shawná watched her father physically, emotionally and verbally abuse her mother. Her father tried to set their house on fire with the family inside, locked her mother out of the house forcing her to sleep in the car, and once pointed a gun to her mother's head in front of Shawná. After her parents divorced, Shawná moved with her mother and siblings to a violence-ridden neighborhood in southeast Washington, D.C. They struggle to make ends meet. Shawná, an excellent student, has become a peer mediator in school. She dreams of college and the opportunity to become a social worker or a lawyer to continue to give back to her community.

**Elijah Iqbal-Scott**

Springbrook High School • Silver Spring, MD • GPA: 3.42

Elijah has been living with loss for most of his short life. His immediate family has gone from six to three people since he was age five. First his mother died after a protracted battle with sickle cell anemia, then his beloved uncle who was more like a big brother, and most recently his grandfather who was the only father figure he had ever known. Elijah lives with his aunt and grandmother who support him with being a stellar student and a talented artist. He dreams of college and becoming an astrophysicist.

**Qiao Bridgette Chen**

South Lakes High School • Reston, VA • GPA: 3.78

Bridgette moved to the U.S. from China four years ago. Her father is a human rights activist who has been mostly in prison since the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. Bridgette spent her childhood with her mother and for years viewed her imprisoned father as a criminal. Concerned for her safety, in 2011 Bridgette's mother arranged for her to come alone to America to start a new life. Bridgette quickly learned English and excelled in school. Her many talents include music, four languages and fashion design. She has testified before Congress and participated in protests for political reform in China. She dreams of college and a bright future in her adopted country.

**Anthony Johnson**

Friendship Tech Prep Academy • Washington, DC • GPA: 3.0

Growing up, Anthony faced many challenges. When he was a child, his mother was arrested and spent time in jail. She lost her job, their apartment, and the car. The turmoil in Anthony's life continued and included a devastating fire at home and a drive-by shooting that injured his mother. For Anthony, school became a safe haven. With the support of school administrators and mentors he has represented his community at the White House and in meetings with D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser. Anthony constantly seeks opportunities to give back — volunteering with Martha's Table and with his church. He dreams of college and becoming a professional chef.

**Taylor Gaskins**

School Without Walls • Washington, DC • GPA: 3.91

Taylor was a Daddy's girl. When she was six years old, he was shot and killed by a gun in Virginia while visiting family. Taylor wrote, "When he died, it was like losing a part of me — and that is a pain that I will never forget." Taylor became overweight and suffered severe bullying. With her mother's support, she transferred schools and began to excel academically. Her family struggles financially, and Taylor often cares for her two young siblings. After visiting Harvard University with the Beat the Odds® program, in 2015 she won a full scholarship and attended summer classes there. She dreams of fighting for social justice armed with a Harvard law degree.

The [Children's Defense Fund](#) Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.