If the needs of America’s children are to be effectively addressed in the future, it is critical that investments be made today to identify and train tomorrow’s child advocates. From its inception the work of Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) has included a strong focus on training, preparing and equipping youth and young adults to be tomorrow’s leaders and advocates for children, both in their own communities and across the country.

After school and every summer in CDF Freedom Schools® programs across the nation, young ‘scholars’ are given access to educational programming that improves their literacy skills and teaches them to be confident in their ability to make change. Each fall, a new cohort of outstanding youth are inducted into a multi-year leadership development, college preparation and post-secondary scholarship program through CDF’s Beat the Odds® Program. Every summer at CDF’s Haley Farm in Clinton, Tenn., hundreds of young adults in the faith community come together for the CDF Samuel Dewitt Proctor Institute for Child Advocacy Ministry, where they are equipped with tools to channel their faith into positive social action. To date over 16,000 college-age young adults have been trained and deployed as Servant Leader Interns through CDF’s Freedom Schools program. Through these and other initiatives CDF strives to provide young people with opportunities to develop their confidence and leadership skills.

CDF Freedom Schools, one of CDF’s widest reaching programs, was founded in 1995 and inspired by the 1964 Freedom Summer, a campaign to bring educational and political opportunity to Black Americans living in the rural south. CDF Freedom Schools programs deliver a culturally relevant, literacy-focused curriculum to children in underserved and impoverished communities, many of which are predominantly communities of color. The program has been found to effectively mitigate summer learning loss and increase self-efficacy beliefs. Built into the CDF Freedom Schools lesson plans are critical thinking discussion points at which teachers and scholars explore social justice concepts related to their readings. These discussions of such topics as fairness, community challenges and conflict resolution prepare the scholars to develop and complete a social action project—such as a letter-writing campaign to an elected official or a clothing ‘drive’ for the homeless—by the end of the program.
The CDF Freedom Schools program fosters in children who need it a belief in their ability to make a difference in the world around them and an understanding of their responsibilities as citizens.

The students are not the only youth who benefit from CDF Freedom Schools, however. Individual sites are predominantly run by college age young people called Servant Leader Interns (SLIs) who most often come from communities similar to those whose children they serve. As SLIs, these young people develop leadership and organizational skills by teaching lessons, monitoring students and helping to implement social action projects, while also acting as role models for the scholars. Ella Baker Trainers, young people who have moved up the leadership ladder through at least three years of training and service at CDF Freedom Schools sites, conduct lessons on classroom management, the developmental needs of children, and curriculum implementation during the week-long training that 1,500 servant leader interns and other CDF Freedom Schools staff complete each year prior the opening of the CDF Freedom Schools sites.

Another program that helps disadvantaged youth excel personally and academically is CDF’s Beat the Odds® Program (BTO). Each year BTO provides scholarships to exceptional young people from Washington D.C., Minnesota, California, New York, Ohio, and Texas who have overcome often tragic life circumstances to achieve academic success and who are committed to giving back to their communities. Since its creation in 1990, BTO has honored students who have overcome homelessness, poverty, and families hurt by violence, death, and illness. BTO scholars have gone on to become teachers, software engineers, authors, ministers, and physicians, and many have dedicated their time to improving the communities from which they came.

Finally, every year, hundreds of seminarians and young people in faith communities gather for the annual Samuel Dewitt Proctor Institute (Proctor) in Clinton, Tenn. At Proctor, CDF brings prominent social activists and leaders in faith to provide participants with inspiration and strategies for integrating their faith-based work with social activism on behalf of children. Participants take part in workshops, devotions, and talks that leave them recharged and ready to bring what they’ve learned back to their communities.

I believe each of us is put on this earth for a purpose and with the duty to make our world a better place. My parents and Black community elders taught, by word and deed, that service is the rent each of us pays for living and that the only thing that lasts is what is shared with others. They passed down the habit of service by creating opportunities for children to serve at very young ages. They took us to help the poor with them. They taught us about the duty of citizenship by taking us with them to vote. They also taught that service and charity are not enough—that we must also raise our voices for justice and freedom for all. And through their examples, they taught us that if we don’t like the way the world is, we can and must do our part to change it. Success is never guaranteed, but contributing to the struggle is a responsibility and a privilege.


When Jaime Gonzales was born, the doctors told his parents that his physical birth defects were so serious he’d probably never see his first birthday; when he survived, they said he’d never walk. But he surprised them: in spite of his medical conditions, which caused him ongoing pain, not only did he walk, he went on to complete a magnet program for gifted children and then a combined bachelors and MD program. Winning a CDF Beat the Odds® award, he said, helped with living expenses and also shaped his medical goals. He attended a CDF leadership training conference and got involved with CDF’s efforts to enroll children in Medicaid and CHIP, even organizing a group of his premed classmates to participate. This experience led him to add a year to his education to get both an MD and a master’s in public health. Then he returned home to practice in South Central Los Angeles with the Spanish-speaking underserved and uninsured population. “That’s where there is a need,” he explained.