

## Eliza Bryant - EBB Celebration Remarks

Thank you, **Paige**, for the invitation to speak tonight, and thank you **Wilsa** (in her 23rd year of Kids Count) and the **entire Kids Count team** for such a beautiful event. I am honored and grateful for the chance to share a few special memories from growing up alongside RI Kids Count.

One of the earliest moments I visualize in full color features my mom and I driving home from preschool in the pouring rain. She pulled over after the highway overpass near Douglas Avenue to offer a ride to a young mother who was struggling to balance a toddler, a baby, and groceries. As we squished in the backseat and got to know each other, I had the earliest inklings of realizing, hmmm, this doesn't feel...typical? But it does feel like the right thing to do.

Around that time, E. B. B. - the initials that would eventually become a well-known moniker - was parenting her own young children while diving into advocacy at City Hall, the women's prison, and housing court during the lead paint crisis. The seed of Rhode Island Kids Count was gestating as she closely followed the child advocacy work of her all-time hero, civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman.

I'm sure there were plenty of complicated steps between roaming around the city offering rides and Kids Count suddenly existing, but my memory skips to the early Kids Count years.

School breakfast for families struggling to buy food, which now feels impossible to imagine schools without, was an issue up for debate! We talked about the absurdity of this at family dinner, and somehow, I ended up in a public access TV promotion of the initiative. I have no idea where that footage is, but know I was very excited, and that it started the trend of loving nothing more than to attend Kids Count events as a fangirl, which my mom's charisma, optimism, and energy tended to universally inspire.

But it wasn't just positivity that drove the work forward. It was content knowledge of the hard, less glamorous issues, and a community of relentless advocates with whom to confront systemic racism and economic strife. My mom had excellent activist role models who offered no shortage of Real Talk. Among them were, of course, Marian Wright Edelman, and the late Nancy Gewirtz, Sister Anne Keefe, and Rob Deblois, who are here with us in spirit tonight. What these leaders shared was an absolute refusal to accept "No" for an answer when it came to questions of equity and justice.

It was from this bedrock that EBB developed into the type of child advocate that earned yet another affectionate nickname - "The Hurricane" - coined in the senate during the last 10-15 years or so of her tenure.

During those decades, the issues still came hard and fast. Experience and authority didn't change the fact that the battles were, and are, always a steep uphill climb.

On the drive down to our July wedding in 2011, Mom secured the last Pre-K seats she was hoping for that year over the phone. You'd think she was selling Girl Scout cookies for universal Pre-K. Hours later, she was happily celebrating this million dollar victory at our rehearsal dinner.

The last advocacy moment I want to remember together involves stepping back a few years earlier, to 2007, during the proposal to make 17-year-olds adults in the eyes of the RI criminal justice system, which drew national attention from child advocacy groups.

I vividly remember a conversation Mom and I had on the back deck while home from college that summer. It was the first time she articulated fear of the political unknown, adult to adult: "Eliza - I just don't know if this is gonna work. I can't imagine what's going to happen if it doesn't. All we can do is the absolute best we can to stop it."

But it did work. With grace, humility, and courage, the community did stop it. Thank God.

These days, I work most closely with beautiful, creative, compassionate 17-and-18-year-olds as a guidance counselor. Their specific age, on the cusp between childhood and adulthood, has never lost its poignance in light of that 2007 fight for their dignity. It is an enormous privilege, accessible by very few, to follow a professional dream beyond survival, and the goal of our school's work is to help them gain that access.

As I do the best I can, on the good days and the bad, I keep one of my mom's favorite lyrics in mind. As a good Irish Catholic school girl growing up in the 60s, it is of course from the Sound of Music. In the scene, sunlight streams through the glass windows of the Austrian nunnery as the Reverend Mother encourages young Maria to leave her safety to follow - "a dream that will need all the love you can give / every day of your life / for as long as you live."

There has been no greater gift from my mother than the opportunity to bear witness to her dream unfolding firsthand, and I assure you, now in the incredibly capable hands of Paige and the team, it is far from over.