

Saira Soto Deputy Executive Director

FOREWORD

Overseeing programs has been a large part of my role at Children's Defense Fund-California (CDF-CA) since I was hired more than 10 years ago. Although it was a new job, CDF-CA was familiar to me. It felt like I was coming back home. Because many years earlier, as a high school senior, I was chosen to be a part of the CDF family through a special program, CDF Beat the Odds®, and it changed my life.

So I sit in a unique position. I can personally attest to what the program has done to support me in my journey to get to and through college, and I can tell you what I've witnessed, heard and felt by being one of the points of contact for nearly 100 young people who have been through the program since I began working here. But those stories are within these pages, and you can read them for yourself.

What I can speak to is why our calling to support young people as they navigate through life obstacles is still as relevant and imperative today as it was 30 years ago when we started the Beat the Odds program here in California. Every day, youth—particularly Black and Brown youth—are confronted with system barriers because of their race, poverty status, sexual orientation, physical ability, language, immigration status and other factors that attempt to prevent them from enjoying the same freedoms as their white peers. And as long as young people continue to be marginalized there is a need for advocacy, and youth leadership and development programs that emphasize access, equity and social justice to help children reach their full potential.

CDF's advocacy efforts and programs affirm youth and the assets of the communities where they live, work and play while empowering them to use their voice and take action to advocate for change. For me, CDF Beat the Odds helped me rise above my circumstance to realize that I was capable of more than what I thought possible. It helped me understand that my struggles were not unique to me, and I learned the importance of community. The people at CDF-California did this by creating safe, learning spaces; they did this by reassuring me through challenges and self-doubt; and they did this by connecting me to programs, resources and networks of people and information that seemed inaccessible. CDF encouraged me to dream and provided the tools and support to turn those dreams into a reality.

I am proud to say that CDF-California continues to support children and respond to the needs of young people, and I look forward to the years ahead and being a part of the movement to build strong youth leaders.



DENNIS DENMAN, CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2007

- Attended University of California, Los Angeles
- First generation college graduate
- Currently: Director of student life and leadership at Seattle Central College

When Dennis Denman was attending Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles, he had no idea how he was ever going to afford college. It was Children's Defense Fund-California (CDF-CA) that awarded him his very first scholarship, and it ended up being so much more.

Children's Defense Fund Beat the Odds® is more than a scholarship for many California youth. For 30 years, the program has supported youth who have overcome tremendous adversity get to and through college. The program provides individualized academic and college counseling, leadership and life skills development, mentorship and internship placement support, and financial assistance.

CDF-CA also provides program participants with laptops which can be a gamechanger for many, as it was for Dennis.

"Along with this scholarship, I received my first ever laptop. It was a MacBook," said Dennis, who graduated in 2007. "I was in high school and I didn't have access to technology. I didn't have a computer at home so I had to write a lot of papers and reports from the library with flash drives. When the library was closed, I had to write reports on an old typewriter and the bad thing about the typewriter is the backspace and the delete button did not work so I had to be super careful to make sure I spelled everything correct."

But more than anything, Dennis is grateful for the love shown by CDF-CA staff, program alumni, board members and the greater CDF-CA community.

"I felt like a little celebrity. I felt like I mattered," he said. "Y'all helped me believe that I am a big deal."

Aside from finances and the scholarship that was also very helpful, I think the investment, just the push to put you around people who cared about you was definitely a big impact.

TIMOTHY WALKER

CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2015

- · Attended University of California, San Francisco
- · Currently: Technical sourcer at a tech company

am eternally grateful for your belief in a little girl and her big dreams.

And I tell you, I had big dreams and I had no idea how I was going to navigate the world so young. And Mrs. Edelman and Children's Defense Fund Beat the Odds were a beacon of light in such a dark time in my life.

LEILANIE CORONEL

- · Attended University of California, Berkeley
- · First generation college graduate
- · Currently: Law firm administrator





- Attended Loyola Marymount University
- Currently: Second grade bilingual teacher

When Elizabeth Lopez applied for the Children's Defense Fund Beat the Odds scholarship program, she researched the organization first. That is when she learned about its founder, Marian Wright Edelman, and her work. She read about Edelman's hope to ensure all children have the same opportunities to succeed in life and how that hope turned into CDF's mission.

Through Children's Defense Fund-California, Elizabeth learned that the support the organization provided was not only for young people, but also extended to their families.

"Through Children's Defense Fund-California, my parents have been able to work towards a path to citizenship which we thought was never possible," Elizabeth said. "With the help of CDF, we were able to contact an amazing lawyer and get help from amazing people to make sure my parents can be legal in this country."

Lam very indebted to the Children's Defense Fund for not only helping myself but looking for ways to help my family in many different ways.

"So I am very indebted to the Children's Defense Fund for not only helping myself but looking for ways to help my family in many different ways."

The journey to citizenship was a long one, but CDF-CA was willing to help every step of the way. Elizabeth's mom obtained legal status in 2016 and her dad became a U.S. citizen in 2021.

MEY SOK, CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2018

Attending University of California, Los Angeles

By the time Mey Sok applied for the Children's Defense Fund Beat the Odds program, she had already experienced several life-changing events. At age four, she had moved from Cambodia to California with her mother and siblings. She had witnessed her mom struggle to make ends meet and take care of the family. Then, in 2014, her older brother, Song, allegedly drowned in a lake.

About a year after his death, Children's Defense Fund-California and the CDF Beat the Odds program supported Mey as she worked through her pain and grief.

"Beat the Odds helped me realize the power and resilience in my adversity," she said. "Specifically, I never saw how unique my experiences were until I was given the space to share it. I've grown to not only understand the impact of my story, but I've learned to find strength in it."

Part of CDF-California's program involves participants sharing their stories and, through self-discovery and growth, being empowered by their experiences rather than ashamed or burdened. The adversity Mey experienced strengthened her, she said, and her passion and success in life is in honor of her brother.

"My biggest accomplishment is that I've been able to heal from the major obstacles in my life and move forward in most challenges that I'm met with," Mey said.

And CDF-California has helped her do that.

Beat the Odds helped me realize the power and resilience in my adversity.

Children's Defense Fund-California and the Beat the Odds program taught me not only to champion my story but to be the champion in my story.

CHASE MOORE

CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2014

- · Attended University of Texas at Austin
- · Currently: Staffer United States Senate





When I entered high school in 2012 I had no intention of going to college and now I'm putting my degree to use.

There were so many parts of the college application process that were difficult and overwhelming but whenever I had doubts or issues, CDF-CA was only one email away.

VINCENT ZAMARRIPA

- · Attended University of California, Riverside
- First generation college graduate



MARINO ANGULO, INAUGURAL CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 1991

- Attended Whittier College
- Currently: High school social science teacher and basketball coach

Marino Angulo grew up helping his mother raise his nine younger siblings. No job was too small to help support his family.

"I would not hesitate to go to the neighbors if I could help them, if I could wash their vehicle, if I could mow their lawn," he said. "My mom made tamales so I became a tamalero. I also became a frutero, a panadero, a paletero—these were some of the things I did growing up that I am very proud of now because I was helping my family."

Even then, Angulo knew a higher education was the critical element in overcoming poverty. And that is where Children's Defense Fund-California, through its Beat the Odds program, helped him achieve his goal.

Angulo, now 48, is a high school teacher and basketball coach. He is married with three children. His oldest is attending UCLA and he could not be prouder.

"I thank Children's Defense Fund-California for helping me break the cycle of poverty," he said. "My siblings are all doing well. And [I] really want to thank CDF for helping me live the American Dream. A young boy of six, emigrating to the U.S., living in east LA, growing up in a poverty-stricken city and really rising above—and largely it was because CDF believed in me."

I thank Children's Defense Fund-California for helping me break the cycle of poverty. I am not sure what the next chapter of my life will look like but I am certain that if I need any support, I can always go to the people at CDF-CA.

They know who I am and where I came from. They ask me if I am taking care of myself and about my sisters.

It's almost like they are extended family. I can't say enough good things about CDF-CA's Beat the Odds program.

RICHARD KENT

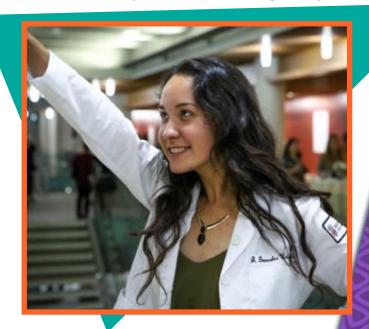
CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2012

· Attended University of California, Los Angeles

Coming from Deaf and mute parents, discrimination made it difficult to find steady employment, so the money that came with the scholarship was definitely needed. But the thing that I most appreciate about this program is the sense of family—the BTO community.

JEANNETTE GONZALES WRIGHT

- Attended Brown University
- Currently: Doctor, practicing family medicine





JAIME GONZALEZ, CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2002

- Attended University of Southern California
- First generation high school graduate
- · Currently: Chair of medicine for Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital

Jaime González was born with a condition called Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita, which causes a variety of physical disabilities, often making it difficult to walk. As a result, Jaime spent much of his childhood in hospitals. As an adult, Jaime still finds himself in the hospital, although now it is as a physician.

Growing up, Jaime struggled with low self-esteem and self-doubt. Nonetheless, he persevered through those difficult years and focused on his strength: academics. He became the first in his family to graduate from high school. It was during high school that Children's Defense Fund-California provided Jaime not just with a scholarship but also support, counseling, mentorship and encouragement to pursue his goal of becoming a doctor.

"Children's Defense Fund-California and the CDF Beat the Odds program impacted my life by recognizing my potential, encouraging me and assisting me in pursuing my academic goals but more importantly, by believing in me and embracing me—which significantly boosted my own self-esteem and confidence after all those years of self-doubt and bullying."

Since his days as a young Beat the Odds scholar, Jaime has continued his relationship with CDF-CA, working closely with them during college to help enroll people into health insurance programs, visiting CDF's Haley Farm in Tennessee to be a part of the organization's pursuit for justice for children and staying in touch with staff to make himself available as a resource. For Jaime, having the opportunity to pay it forward and make an impact on youth who may find themselves in a similar situation as he did growing up is the ultimate reward.

MICHAEL DALLATORRE, CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 1998

- Attended Los Angeles City College
- Currently: Cinematographer

On one night in December 1998, Michael Dallatorre began a new chapter in his young life. It was the night he was celebrated as a Children's Defense Fund Beat the Odds honoree. It was also the night he heard CDF Founder Marian Wright Edelman speak; and it was like she was

speaking directly to him.

"She lit a fire in my heart," Michael said, remembering that evening nearly 25 years ago. "From that day on, I have challenged myself to make a difference. Every day asking myself how I can make a difference in this world, in the lives of others, for children like myself."

At 12 years old, Michael lost his father to cancer. Life was not easy for him and his brother, raised by their disabled mother who was in and out of hospitals and nursing homes. Through organizations like Children's Defense Fund-California, he found hope, love and encouragement, eventually realizing his dream of becoming a filmmaker.

CDF-CA made such an impact on Michael's life that he has remained actively involved. Michael has mentored BTO program participants, served on the selection committee, donated his time, skills and equipment to help produce mini-documentaries for the program, and he currently is on CDF-CA's executive council.

"It brings me joy to know that I am a part of an organization that inspires and brings hope to the young people of California and across the U.S.," he said.



BRITANY COLLINS, CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2011

- Attended University of California, Berkeley
- Currently: U.S. Army Child & Youth Services Lead Program Assistant

While Britany Collins' past did not dictate her future, her experiences as a child and young adult certainly influenced her decision to pursue a job working with youth.

"Having survived homelessness and abuse, my passion has always been toward children in need," she said.

As the lead program assistant for the United States Army Child & Youth Services, Britany helps provide a safe space for military children who are dealing with challenges, particularly related to the absence of a parent, an area where Britany can relate.

Growing up without her mother or father, Britany overcame many obstacles to get to college and graduate with not only a bachelor's degree but a master's as well.

"While a BA is quite the accomplishment, CDF-CA and the Beat the Odds program made me realize I was capable of even greater things," she said.

And today, Britany wants to do the same for others.

"My goal is to save someone. To help someone else believe that they too are greater than their circumstance. To help someone believe, just like CDF-CA helped me believe, in the power and potential that they have within."

CDF-CA and the Beat the Odds program made me realize I was capable of even greater things.



To think that I am part of this beautiful community where I am accepted, where I feel like I belong to, where every single one of my identities—being a first-generation low-income undocumented student—is appreciated, validated and even celebrated.

JAZMIN DE LUNA

CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2019

- · Attending University of California, Berkeley
- First generation college student

It's almost like a fraternity.
It's been a great family to be a part of.

JALEN WOODS

- · Attended University of Southern California
- · Currently: Global facilities coordinator for tech company





JAYLA AND JAYLON GORDON, CDF BEAT THE ODDS CLASS OF 2022

Attending Crenshaw Arts Technology Charter High School

Jayla and Jaylon Gordon are different people than they were two years ago when they applied for the Children's Defense Fund Beat the Odds program.

In middle school, the two spent two years living on the street in a tent with their mother before reconnecting and moving in with their father and grandmother. When they learned about the CDF Beat the Odds program, the trauma was fresh and it was difficult to openly discuss their experiences. The teenagers, now 17, have come a long way. They are no longer embarrassed by their past circumstances but are empowered by them and the lessons they learned. Lessons like "taking things day by day and staying focused on our long-term goals of graduating high school and going to a great university," Jayla said.

The staff at CDF-California has helped tremendously by calling regularly just to check in, providing gift cards for food and even financial support whenever they can, she added. Jaylon is also grateful.

"The Children's Defense Fund Beat the Odds program validated [our] experience in so many ways. Being recognized by CDF-California helped us walk a little taller in school and not feel so marginalized when we share our story," he said.

The brother and sister, who will graduate from high school in 2022, hope they can do the same for others.

"CDF has helped us realize how much of a positive impact we can have in our community by sharing our upbringing and serving as a source of hope for other homeless youth," Jayla said.





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