

Remarks by Ellen & Will Pryor upon Presentation of the Children's Champion Award
CASA Awards Dinner
April 27, 2000

ELLEN

Twenty years ago on a **beautiful sandy beach** in San Juan, looking **out over the inky blue water**, Merrill's conscience was touched when, in a heartbeat, he was moved from self-congratulation about his professional success, to his shock at seeing a beachside slum -- **children** and their families in total poverty.

Many of us have had similar experiences, but we "**turn the page**". Not Merrill. Merrill's humble obedience to the message he received twenty years ago is why we are celebrating him tonite.

WILL

Merrill's got an embarrassing little problem. He's got about as much control over his hand tremor as a dog does wagging its tail when its happy about something. And when he receives an award, if he truly thinks he's undeserving, like he'll say, then the tremor is barely noticeable. But if what he is really thinking is **SOMEBODY SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THIS FIVE YEARS AGO**, then no water glass up here will be safe. The podium, itself, may be at risk!

We'll find out what he **really** thinks in a few minutes!

Merrill's response and remarkable obedience to the call he heard twenty years ago has enriched the lives of many of us in this room, and many more children and their families in our community, and beyond.

In the early 80's Merrill founded the South Dallas Legal Clinic, perhaps the most successful *pro bono* service project in the country - - - the generator of countless other neighborhood legal clinics and initiatives- - - and **thousands of children**, and their parents, are the beneficiaries. Here is a short excerpt from *The Dallas Experiment*, a video that has inspired *pro bono* efforts all over the United States.

<excerpt from The Dallas Experiment>

Many of you in this room soon followed: lawyers, paralegals, and law firms. An unprecedented, and inspiring success. A crowning achievement for anyone..

BUT WAS THAT ENOUGH? ("nooooo") **NO, that wasn't enough.** Merrill began to shift his practice to family law, so he could more immediately and routinely impact the lives of children and families.

BUT WAS THAT ENOUGH? (“noooooo”) NO, that wasn’t enough. So Merrill became a family court judge, and soon after took his robe, his gavel, and his court reporter to South Dallas, to the Clinic. By this simple act, he inspired many more lawyers and other volunteers, he recruited many of you judges to go along with him, and most importantly, he brought justice to a neighborhood that doesn’t see justice very often. Local, state, and national attention followed.

BUT WAS THAT ENOUGH? (“noooooo”) NO, that wasn’t enough. His experience presiding over child custody cases caused Merrill to witness first hand the trauma of divorce and its impact on children. The following video excerpt is from “Don’t Forget the Children”, inspired by Merrill, to this day standard viewing for most divorcing parents in Dallas, and an award winner:

<excerpt from Don’t Forget The Children>

BUT WAS THAT ENOUGH? (“noooooo”) NO, that wasn’t enough. In recent years, as the issues of children and juvenile justice became more volatile, and more violent, Merrill agreed to serve on the Dallas County Juvenile Board. At the meeting that ended his two years as Chairman, the room erupted in a standing ovation. Merrill’s service to the Board, to the legal profession, to our community, AND as a CHAMPION for children, makes him a most worthy recipient of CASA’s CHILDREN’S CHAMPION AWARD.

Merrill, tonite we stand with you on a beautiful sandy beach, and we look out over the inky blue water. We are convicted, but your example has inspired us. And we continue to need inspiration.

However we honor you this evening, *it isn’t enough.*