

**Remarks by Stephanie Gendell, Associate Executive Director for Policy and Public Affairs, Citizens' Committee for Children
At the 2012 Eleanor Roosevelt Girls Leadership Worldwide Program dinner, July 24, 2012:**

Good evening. I feel so honored and privileged to be speaking at the 2012 Eleanor Roosevelt Girls' Leadership Worldwide Program dinner. Each and every one of you who I have had the opportunity to meet so far tonight has impressed me with the commitment to social justice you have, and at such a young age. I feel certain that Eleanor Roosevelt would be so pleased that you are the young women participating in this program, and carrying out her legacy.

As you know, Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady of the World, overcame a challenging childhood to become one of the greatest leaders and social activists of all time- a reminder to us all of the great things one woman can accomplish in a life time. It is extremely humbling to be speaking at an event that carries her name, is in recognition of her accomplishments and commitment to improving the lives of the poor, and is intended to further the life missions of inspiring girls like you all.

What you may not know about Eleanor Roosevelt is that she is also one of the founders of the child advocacy organization where I now work, called Citizen's Committee for Children, or CCC for short. Our mission now, as it was when we were founded 68 years ago, is to ensure that every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe. Each day when I go to work, I see the picture of Eleanor Roosevelt in our office and I am reminded of her commitment to the children and to the social activism she embodied and founded CCC upon. CCC is a child advocacy organization, fighting to make New York a better place to be a child. We do this by gathering facts and data, educating the community and advocating to government officials on behalf of children. What makes us particularly unique is that we do this not just with the help and commitment of staff like myself, but with over 200 volunteers who are the citizens in Citizens' Committee for Children.

While my life course can in no way match that of Eleanor Roosevelt, I have been asked to share with you a bit about my leadership journey and the lessons I have learned along the way.

In preparing for these remarks, it made me think about what I was doing when I was 14, 15 and 16, like you all. I won't tell you how long ago that was—but I can tell you that when I was that age my family did not have a computer, we used a VCR to record shows off of the television and I listened to music on a Walkman. But I think that aside from those technological shortcomings, I was in some ways similar to you all.

When I was 14 years old, a 6-year old child named Lisa Steinberg was killed by her adopted father while her mother, who was also being beaten, failed to protect her or call the authorities. I decided that day that I was going to stop child abuse so that no other child senselessly died like Lisa did. I began focusing my school projects and after-school activities on learning about child abuse and community service. At the age of 16, I was elected President of my high school's Key Club, which was a school club for students interested in community service. The School Board of my town had objected to another group forming a Bible Club due to religious implications and the students interested in forming the Bible Club sued the school. The court ruled that school was required to either allow all student clubs or eliminate any clubs that were not educational. The school decided to eliminate the clubs that were not educational, including the Key Club. It was then that I had my first letter to the editor published in the local newspaper, and testified at my first public hearing about why the Key Club, and community service, were clearly educational.

I tell you these stories of my life when I was your age because I can see now how they laid the groundwork for where my career is today—and I think they serve as a great reminder to you all about how the same will be true for you.

After high school, I went to college and majored in Human Development and Family Studies. I continued to focus my research and activities on children's issues, family relationships, child abuse and foster care. After a summer internship at the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, DC, I decided that I wanted to have a career in public policy—to advance and implement systemic changes for children. Specifically, I decided to dedicate my career to child

welfare, the system that is intended to prevent child abuse and neglect and provide foster care for children who are not safe with their families. I then somehow ended up in Law School, where I spent three of my most challenging years—eager to graduate and do SOMETHING to help children.

While in law school, I met a lawyer who became a mentor to me. In the fall of my first year of law school, we were told to begin applying for summer internships. Like any good student and good listener, I mailed out lots of resumes and cover letters to children’s organizations throughout the country. Athena, who worked at an organization in Boston near my law school, called me in for an interview and told me that there was no need to wait for the summer if I wanted to volunteer with her. I started immediately. Athena taught me the life and career lessons that are not taught in law school. Notably, Athena taught me the lesson I carry with me every day—that the goal of any job in child welfare, is to make your job unnecessary.

Athena also believed that the best way to learn about the systems I wanted to change, was to work in the system itself—thus for the government. I followed Athena’s advice and my first job out of law school was working at New York City’s child welfare agency, called the Administration for Children’s Services. I spent eight years working to make change from the inside. And I learned that it is sometimes easier to make changes from within government. I also learned how difficult and slow it is to make change. And then in January 2006, another 6 year old girl, this time Nixzmary Brown, died after being beaten by her father, while her mother, who was also beaten, failed to protect her or call the authorities.

While I knew that I was not responsible for that tragedy, I began to question whether there was something more or different that I should do to stop child abuse and neglect. Six months later, I accepted my job at Citizens’ Committee for Children.

Since starting at CCC, I have devoted much of the past six years to documenting the need for services to prevent child abuse and neglect and advocating to the State government in Albany, the New York City government and the agency I used to work for, ACS, that they need to spend more money on child abuse prevention services. Just like when I was 16, I was once again speaking at public hearings and to the media—this time about why New York City needed to dedicate money to

preventing child abuse. Two years ago, this advocacy paid off when the City added millions of dollars so that 3,000 more families could access these services.

My journey has definitely been bumpy and full of twists and turns. Somewhere along the way I lost my naiveté and the belief that I could single-handedly stop all child abuse and neglect. You should know that I struggle every day with questions about whether I am doing all that I can do, to make a difference for children. I believe that it is this daily soul-searching and struggle that keeps my passion alive.

In addition, I have learned that there is power in numbers. Nothing that I have accomplished for children has been or could have been done alone. Social justice requires collaboration. For example, in my current job I work closely with the other staff at CCC, the over 200 CCC volunteers, as well as other advocates, service providers, government officials, parents and children themselves. As you begin to lay out your own paths, you will find that working with others with similar passions will make traveling on your paths easier and make your goals more likely to be attained. This is of course, what Eleanor Roosevelt did as well.

When Eleanor Roosevelt founded CCC, she did so with other women who were similarly committed to making New York City a better place to be a child. Together they founded an organization that is steadfast in this commitment and provides opportunities for all New Yorkers to come together and advocate on behalf of children.

Eleanor Roosevelt's family has continued this tradition with the creation of the Eleanor Roosevelt Girls' Leadership Worldwide program. As those who have had the opportunity to participate in this program, you have a unique opportunity to carry out her legacy. And as participants in the program, you are already well on your way. You clearly have a commitment to social justice. You are learning the skills to accomplish your goals. And now you are part of a group that has the power to do many great things together.

I urge each of you to hold onto your commitment to social justice regardless of where your life paths lead you. Remember that you can accomplish more if you work with others dedicated to improving the world around you than if you sought

to do this on your own. Seek out others who also believe in social justice, like CCC does, like I have done and like Eleanor Roosevelt did.

As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "In the long run, we shape our lives, and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility." You are all clearly on the path to making the world a better place for the rest of us. Your choices have brought you this far already. I wish you much luck in the choices you make for your future.