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Premium Content

# Women of Influence: Joan Wallace-Benjamin knows Home for Little Wanderers is where she's meant to be

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## Joan Wallace-Benjamin

**Title:** President & CEO, [The Home for Little Wanderers](#)

**Age:** 62

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in psychology, [Wellesley College](#), 1975; Ph.D. in social policy and management, Brandeis University Heller School for Social Policy and Management, 1980

**Residence:** Dedham



W. MARC BERNSAU

Joan Wallace-Benjamin is president and CEO of The Home for Little Wanderers.

## THE INFLUENCE FACTOR

**Did you have mentors along the way in your career?** My mother. That cuts across all of my 62 years. My mother is my best friend and confidante, someone I can say and tell anything to. My father was also but he died just as I started at the Urban League. [Hubie Jones](#). I met him back when I was at Wellesley. [U.T. Saunders](#), who is

now deceased, and Sam Gerson, who is deceased also, of Filene's Basement He was the board chairman of the Urban League for six of my 11 years there. We made a terrific team. There was tremendous mutual respect.

**Who do you turn to for advice today?** Mom is still in the picture. She's 89. And Hubie. And my husband.

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With one branch of its roots dating to 1799 and another to the Civil War, the Home for Little Wanderers is a living history lesson. Telling it is CEO Joan Wallace-Benjamin, who grew up during another tumultuous period in the 1960s as the child of civil rights activists. That led to her own push for social change as head of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts for 11 years and a brief stint as chief of staff for former Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick, the first African American to hold that office.

Married to lawyer and entrepreneur Milton Benjamin 40 years this month and the mother of two grown sons, Wallace-Benjamin spoke with Business Journal correspondent Robin Washington about her role at the Home and the organization's track record for serving Boston's underprivileged kids.

**When you say "Home for Little Wanderers," the word "little" throws people off. It sounds like a little house somewhere.** It's funny because right after I accepted the position, I remember (Pastor) Ray Hammond saying to me, "Joan, you're going from the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts to the Home for Little Wanderers?" And I said, "Yeah, I am." It's much bigger, much more complex than it sounds.

Several years after I got here, we engaged in a branding exercise around the name of the organization. The consultants told us we would be crazy to change the name.

We were a staff of 800, with 32 programs. We were really gigantic. Those first several years I spent trying to narrow the focus, figure out what we are good at. We're now around 700 employees, 22 programs and a \$50 million budget. We kind of right-sized ourselves.

It goes back to 1799? It was called the Boston Female Asylum, however you want to read asylum; either they thought the women were crazy or they were keeping them

safe in an asylum, I don't know.

In 1865, the Home for Little Wanderers came on. The name came from orphans of the Civil War who were literally wandering the streets of Boston, eating out of garbage cans. The clergy came together and started the organization, which was really along the lines of an orphanage where kids could come in off the street and live.

**From the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement: Your parents were activists in New York?** Yes, they were. My parents participated in civil disobedience, went to the March on Washington. I grew up in a family where people were used to speaking up and speaking out. They had a very good friend who was the administrative assistant to (Urban League national executive director) Whitney Young. I was at Head Start (from 1981 to 1985, as deputy director, for Action for Boston Community Development) when I got a call that they were looking for under-30 trustees. Of course I was interested. Who wouldn't be?

**Would you go back to government? Did you consider serving on Baker's transition team, or running for office yourself?** No.

**That's pretty definitive! For fun you cook and sing?** I like to cook, and family and friends enjoy what I cook. I love Italian and Thai food. I sang in a choir at Wellesley. I like R&B, torch songs. Never saw a karaoke machine I didn't like.

**If this were a broadcast interview, I'd ask you to sing a few bars.** Good thing we're not doing that! I'll keep my day job.

**Why didn't you stay on with Gov. Patrick's administration much beyond the transition?** For three months, the transition work was fabulous. We hired cabinet secretaries, we hired senior staff people. I was really good at that. Then the inauguration happened and we went into the Statehouse. The governor had not been in elected office before, I had not been in elected office before. It felt a little bit like drinking water from a firehose. The Romney administration had left us very little to work with. The Home had launched the search for its new CEO and said, "We have four finalists. We're going to hire one of these people unless you say you'll come back." I was like, "How soon do you need me?"

**You went from national to local, which is reverse of most people.** Right. Donald

Polk at the time was president in Boston and asked me to come join the local board. Then he went to New York and they were looking for someone to take over Boston.