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LDF Mourns the Loss of Congressman John Lewis, Legendary and Beloved Civil Rights Icon

Today, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) mourns the heartbreaking loss of The Honorable John Lewis, an esteemed member of Congress and revered civil rights hero with whom our organization has a deeply personal history. Mr. Lewis passed away on July 17, 2020, following a battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 80 years old.

Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel: “I don’t know of another leader in this country with the moral standing of Rep. John Lewis. His life and work helped shape the best of our national identity. We revered him not only for his work and sacrifices during the Civil Rights Movement, but because of his unending, stubborn, brilliant determination to press for justice and equality in this country. There was no cynicism in John Lewis; no hint of despair even in the darkest moments. Instead, he showed up relentlessly with commitment and determination - but also love, and joy and unwavering dedication to the principles of non-violence. He spoke up and sat-in and stood on the front lines – and risked it all. This country – every single person in this country – owes a debt of gratitude to John Lewis that we can only begin to repay by following his demand that we do more as citizens. That we ‘get in the way.’ That we ‘speak out when we see injustice’ and that we keep our ‘eyes on the prize.’”

Janai Nelson, Associate Director-Counsel: “It is with deep sadness that we mourn the loss of Representative John Lewis. Throughout his entire life, Mr. Lewis remained zealously committed to getting into ‘good trouble, necessary trouble.’ Mr. Lewis was unabashed about making bold and sweeping moves to effect change, repeatedly placing his own safety and welfare at risk to help create a country where true equality for all is tantamount. Mr. Lewis has served as an inspiration to the civil rights community for many years, and we will continue to cause ‘good trouble’ in his name as we take to the streets, the courts, and the halls of government to promote and protect the rights of Black people in the United States. We are forever indebted to Mr. Lewis for his fearless guidance and are honored to continue advancing his mission.”

Lisa Cylar Barrett, Director of Policy: “The passing of Representative Lewis leaves a void in our country and in our halls of government that cannot be replaced. Throughout his lengthy career as a civil rights activist and member of Congress, securing and advancing voting rights for African Americans remained a critical imperative to which he was steadfastly committed. His Selma to Montgomery marches in the 1960s paved the way for the introduction and passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA), a hallmark piece of civil rights legislation. As a congressman, Mr. Lewis repeatedly advocated for the VRA’s reauthorization, and, when the Supreme Court gutted a key component of this historic legislation in 2013, he relentlessly pushed to reinstate its protections. As we continue to fight to restore the VRA’s protections and advance civil rights legislation, we do so on a path forged by John Lewis.”

LDF's relationship with Mr. Lewis dates back to 1965, when, after the first attempted Selma to Montgomery march – a day known as “Bloody Sunday” – LDF worked alongside him, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other activists to ensure that the Selma to Montgomery march would ultimately succeed. LDF and co-counsel filed a lawsuit, *Wallace v. Williams*, in which the judge ordered that marchers must be protected by federal officials. LDF lawyers, including former Director-Counsel Jack Greenberg, worked with the activists to draft and submit to the court a plan for the march to ensure a safe and secure route from Selma to Montgomery. This plan became part of the court's order allowing the march to finally go forward to completion in Montgomery on the third and final attempt in late March 1965.

LDF also represented Mr. Lewis in several other key cases. LDF founder, who later became the first African American Supreme Court Justice, Thurgood Marshall served as a member of the LDF team representing Mr. Lewis and fellow freedom riders in *Lewis v. Southeastern Greyhound* in 1961. LDF acted as counsel for Mr. Lewis and his co-protesters in several other cases in 1965 — *Boynton v. Clark*, *Boynton v. Thomas*, and *Alabama ex rel Wallace v. Lewis* — following their arrests for voter registration and unequal education-related protests.

For LDF, Mr. Lewis will always remain an iconic part of our institutional history. We worked in tandem with him at the height of the civil rights movement, standing alongside him as he broke barriers and forever changed the lives of African Americans by securing long overdue equality and justice for all.

Mr. Lewis represented the very soul of the civil rights movement and his loss is profoundly felt by those in this community and beyond. We extend our sincerest condolences to Mr. Lewis' loved ones at this difficult time and forever honor his legacy as a civil rights pioneer.

Read LDF's tribute to Mr. Lewis [here](#).

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation's first civil and human rights law organization. LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.

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