A Tribute to George Bundy Smith and E. Richard Larson


“This month LDF lost two treasured members of our family, the Hon. George Bundy Smith, and attorney Richard Larson. Both these exceptional men represent the standard of excellence and commitment to justice that is the hallmark of LDF lawyers, and have left behind lasting contributions in the advancement of civil rights and in our profession,” said Sherrilyn Ifill, LDF’s President and Director-Counsel.

George Bundy Smith was born on April 7, 1937 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Raised in a segregated neighborhood in Washington D.C., he went on to attend Yale University and Yale Law School, where he earned his law degree alongside his twin sister Inez Smith Reid.

Smith followed his passion for civil rights early on, leaving law school during exams in his second year to travel to Montgomery, Alabama as a Freedom Rider. In 1961, Smith and about nine other Freedom Riders were arrested for sitting at an all-whites lunch counter. Thurgood
Marshall, Lou Redding, Jack Greenberg, and Fred Gray represented Smith following his arrest, and Redding took the case all the way to the Supreme Court, where the conviction was overturned.

After graduating from law school, Smith began his legal career as a staff attorney for LDF. From 1962-1964, Smith played a vital role in several prominent LDF cases. During his tenure, LDF brought and won Meredith v. Fair, which resulted in the integration of the University of Mississippi. In 1964, Smith married his wife, Alene Lohman Jackson, and left LDF to serve as a law secretary to a handful of prominent New York City judges.

Smith began his own judicial career in 1975, serving an interim term on the Civil Court of New York City, before also serving on the New York State Supreme Court in New York County and at the Appellate Division, First Department. In 1992, he became the third African American ever to serve on the Court of Appeals in New York, the highest court in the state. In one of his great triumphs on the bench, Smith authored an opinion striking down as unconstitutional a key provision of New York’s death penalty statute, which in effect, halted capital punishment in the state. After serving on the Court of Appeals for 14 years, Smith retired in 2006 and joined Chadbourne & Parke LLP as a partner.

Smith received many awards and honors throughout his career, including the Hon. William Brennan Award for Outstanding Jurist presented by the New York State Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and the Spirit of Excellence Award from the American Bar Association’s Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity. In 2009, former LDF President and Director-Counsel Elaine Jones received the George Bundy Smith “Pioneer Award” from the Commercial and Federal Litigation Section of the New York Bar Association. The award, named in Smith’s honor, celebrated her lifelong contributions to civil rights and the nation. Smith is survived by his wife, sister, and their two children.

“Richard Larsen was an extraordinary, careful, thorough, and always well-prepared lawyer who contributed magnificently to LDF’s work,” said Elaine Jones, former LDF President and Director-Counsel.

E. Richard Larson was born in 1944 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Larson attended Dartmouth College where he played for the All-Ivy Championship Hockey Team from 1963 to 1964. After graduating from Dartmouth in 1966, Larson went on to earn his law degree at the University of Minnesota Law School in 1969. He then clerked for Judge Gerald W. Heaney of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 8th Circuit.

Larsen began his legal career with the National Employment Law Center, before working at the American Civil Liberties Union as a national staff counsel and then at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund as Vice President for litigation for their Los-Angeles chapter. In 1997, Larsen joined LDF where he, among other accomplishments, led a team implementing the consent decree in Labor/Community Strategy Center v. MTA. The agreement settled a class action lawsuit on behalf of minority bus riders who challenged the discriminatory impact of Los
Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s proposal to raise fares and eliminate monthly passes while pouring millions into the construction of rail lines for white suburban commuters. The 16-year, multi-million-dollar agreement included fare controls and adjustments, reduction of overcrowding and the addition of new and expanded service, particularly on routes that impact low-income, transit-dependent riders.

“Richard was a trailblazer when it came to improving transportation access for African Americans,” said Ajmel Quereshi, Senior Counsel at LDF. “His work in the mid-90’s to improve Los Angeles’ busing system served as the model for not only LDF’s complaint regarding the cancellation of the Baltimore Red Line, but similar challenges to discriminatory transportation systems around the country.”

Throughout his distinguished career, Larson argued four cases before the Supreme Court and wrote four books, including The Rights of Racial Minorities. Larson is survived by his sister Jane and his two nephews.

LDF alums Bill Lann Lee, Constance L. Rice, Robert García, Richard Larson in 1997