NAACP Legal Defense Fund Commemorates Louis Harris

The NAACP Legal Defense Fund mourns the loss of long-time board member Louis Harris. Harris was a giant of American political life, revolutionizing the use of public opinion analysis in the sphere of politics and public policy. His early work with candidate - later President - John F. Kennedy, broke ground in the use of polling data by presidential candidates.

“Lou Harris brought his insight, acumen, and innovation to bear for LDF,” said Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. “LDF will miss Lou’s decades of experience and knowledge, as well as his commitment to understanding and improving the national dialogue around race and racial justice.”

Harris ably served as both a member and senior member of the LDF board of directors, providing his wisdom and strategic counsel for 27 years. In addition to his service on the board, Lou undertook groundbreaking surveys commissioned by LDF to track attitudes over time about some of the most fraught and complicated racial justice issues facing our country. From the death penalty, to school integration, to workplace equality. Lou and his firm Harris Associates surveyed thousands of Americans, black and white, in what would ultimately become a signature LDF report, *The Unfinished Agenda on Race in America*.

Lou began his career in public opinion research when he was a junior officer serving in the Navy during World War II when the Navy asked him to determine whether sailors stationed in Boston were being treated properly. From there, Lou went on to be a researcher for a veterans’ organization before joining noted market researcher Elmo Roper’s firm. After five years, Lou moved to form his own polling organization, focusing on political polling. He served as the lead public opinion analyst and as a key advisor to Senator and then President John F. Kennedy.

Harris was also a pioneer in the field of television political coverage, devising an analysis technique for CBS News that allowed the network to predict the outcome of an election based on computer analysis of voting results from a small number of key voting areas. In addition to polling, Lou was a noted television commentator and prolific writer, authoring a syndicated column and several books on pressing national questions including race and racial justice. He also monitored and shaped opinion on some of the biggest topics of the last century, from Watergate to presidential elections, and of course civil rights.

Lou was born on January 6, 1921 in New Haven, Connecticut to Harry and Frances Harris. He developed an early interest in politics and journalism, attending the University of North Carolina and graduating with a degree in economics in 1942. He married Florence Yard in 1943; she predeceased him in 2004. Lou is survived by a loving family of three children and four grandchildren and leaves a legacy that will inform the American political landscape for generations to come.

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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 and 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.