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## **LDF Mourns the Loss of Legendary Civil Rights Leader Dr. Bernard LaFayette**

The [Legal Defense Fund](#) (LDF) mourns the loss of Dr. Bernard LaFayette Jr., a gifted and courageous leader of the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. LaFayette was a key figure in the fight for equality and justice for Black people, risking his life as a Freedom Rider in the throes of anti-Black violence and paving the path to foundational rights for Black people in America. He was a driving force in many of the movements that heralded the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, one of the most significant achievements in Civil Rights history. The VRA made critical strides towards ending discriminatory voting practices and provided critical tools to combat discriminatory election rules and practices.

Dr. LaFayette was 85 at the time of his passing on March 6, 2026.

LDF President and Director-Counsel Janai Nelson issued the following statement:

“The world lost a leader. We mourn Dr. Bernard Lafayette, but we will never forget his bravery and awe-inspiring legacy. Dr. Lafayette’s commitment to civil rights, Black people, and the foundational tenets of nonviolence reverberate across the entire history of America into the present day. Dr. LaFayette embodied the very core sentiment of a trailblazer, wielding grassroots strategy and durable coalition-building for the betterment of Black people in unprecedented ways and with indomitable spirit. As state repression infected America, as the machinery of law enforcement violence assailed Black communities, Dr. LaFayette risked everything to transform America with nonviolence and ensure generations of Black people would be delivered the equality they deserved. In doing so, he surfaced the power of Black organizing to a national stage.

“This past weekend marked the 61<sup>st</sup> Selma jubilee, a remembrance that commemorated those who embarked on the historic marches to secure the right to vote, and it was also thick with the bright memory of Dr. LaFayette. He was a bridge that connected Black people together with united sentiment and unyielding purpose, and his life will forever resonate with the call for the promise of democracy to be upheld. Every march, every footstep will carry the weight of Dr. LaFayette’s commitment to civil rights. Our hearts go out to his family and loved ones. He will not be forgotten. Dr. LaFayette’s legacy will endure.”

Dr. LaFayette was a member of the Nashville Student Movement, and one of the founding members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

In 1962, Dr. Lafayette became the director of Alabama Registration Campaign, where he engaged in critical groundwork that set the stage for the Selma to Montgomery march.

Dr. Lafayette was a Freedom Rider, who endured numerous beatings and attacks while fighting against segregation, ultimately being arrested in Jackson, Mississippi before being sent to Parchmen Prison. But Dr. LaFayette's story did not end there. He later helped organize the Chicago Freedom Movement in 1966. He also became ordained as a Baptist minister, later serving as president of the American Baptist Theological Seminary.

In 1968, Dr. LaFayette was the national coordinator of the Poor People's Campaign, which sought to deliver economic justice to poor Americans. LDF provided legal support to the campaign.

In 1973, Dr. Lafayette was named the first ever director of the Peace Education Program at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota.

In 1998, he became the director of the Center for Nonviolence and Peace at the University of Rhode Island.

In 2010, LDF filed an amicus brief in *Hithon V. Tyson Foods, Inc.*, representing the interests of Dr. LaFayette and a number of other notable civil rights leaders. John Hithon, a Black man who worked for Tyson Foods for 13 years, was passed over for a promotion in favor of two white men. Mr. Hithon's boss referred to him as "boy." The brief argues that it is widely recognized that the use of the term "boy" in reference to a Black man is deeply offensive and reflects discriminatory intent. The brief explains that all amici have heard the racially coded term "boy" directed toward themselves, members of their families and friends, or toward other ministers and pioneers of the Civil Rights Movement.

In 2019, Dr. LaFayette was awarded with the Coretta Scott King Legacy award for his role in advancing civil rights.

Dr. LaFayette's unwavering commitment to justice and peace carried on through the decades, reaching countless communities and reshaping the fabric of America.

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*Founded in 1940, the [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) is the nation's first civil rights legal organization. LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957, though it was founded under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall while he was at the NAACP. LDF's Thurgood*

*Marshall Institute (TMI) is a division of LDF that undertakes innovative research and houses LDF's archive. In all media attributions, please refer to us as the Legal Defense Fund or LDF (do not include NAACP) and refer to the Institute as LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute or TMI.*