



For Immediate Release
Tuesday, November 22, 2022

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LDF Mourns the Loss of Board Member Cecilia Marshall, Wife of LDF Founder Thurgood Marshall

The [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) is deeply saddened by the passing of Cecilia “Cissy” Suyat Marshall. Ms. Marshall was the wife of LDF’s founder and the nation’s first Black Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, a former staff member and long-standing LDF board member, and a tireless devotee to the cause of equal justice.

As a young employee of the arm of the NAACP that would eventually become LDF, Ms. Marshall contributed to the exhaustive preparation for the [Brown v. Board of Education](#) trial, which overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine of legally sanctioned discrimination and forever changed the American landscape.

Known as Cissy, Ms. Marshall was born Cecilia Suyat on July 20, 1928, to Filipino parents on the Hawaiian island of Maui. The island’s diversity – and its distance from the United States, which it would not join as a state until 1959 – initially insulated Ms. Marshall from the harsh racial discrimination that plagued America until she moved to the continental United States. As a young adult, she actively protested racial discrimination and became deeply engaged in the fight for racial justice.

After marrying Mr. Marshall in 1955, she faithfully supported him through some of the most trying passages of his career, including his contentious Supreme Court confirmation hearing. After his death in 1993, she acted as a fastidious steward of Justice Marshall’s legacy, giving frequent interviews about their life together and serving with organizations that had been important to him, including LDF.

In reaction to today’s news, LDF’s current and former President and Directors-Counsel issued the following statements:

Janai Nelson, LDF’s President and Director-Counsel: “It is with a heavy heart that we received the news today of Ms. Marshall’s passing. Ms. Marshall was a civil rights activist, historian, mother, grandmother, widow of LDF’s founder Thurgood Marshall, and a phenomenal supporter of LDF – including as a devoted member of our Board of Directors. She also had a robust sense of humor, was kind-hearted, and exuded a mighty force belied by her petite stature. She was a cherished member of the LDF family, and we extend our deepest condolences to her immediate and extended family who shared her with us so generously over the years.”

Sherrilyn Ifill, LDF’s seventh President and Director-Counsel: “It saddens me deeply to learn of the passing of Mrs. Marshall, who was a faithful member of the LDF Board, and a great lady. It was my absolute honor to have the opportunity to get to know her, and to bring her

closer to the fold of the LDF family during my time as Director-Counsel. Her devotion to LDF, the organization her husband founded and where she once worked as a secretary in her early days, remained undiminished, and she took her Board service seriously. She was the recipient of numerous awards from LDF and lent her name and support to our efforts to support young civil rights lawyers, most recently through the launch of LDF's Marshall-Motley Scholars Program.

“But what I appreciated most was Mrs. Marshall's warmth, energy, and sense of humor – and her fulsome embrace of LDF's leaders and staff. She was a meticulous caretaker of her husband's legacy and delighted in seeing the growth of young LDF lawyers who were following in the path he created. Mrs. Marshall also revered the Supreme Court and enjoyed her membership in the circle of spouses of former Supreme Court justices. On the rare occasions when she attended oral arguments in the Court, it always seemed to me that everyone sat up a little bit straighter. I know I did. I extend my deepest condolences to the entire Marshall family and to my former colleagues on the Board and staff at LDF, in this monumental loss of our beloved Board member.”

Ted Shaw, LDF's fifth President and Director-Counsel: “I am saddened to learn of Cissy Marshall's passing. She was an important part of Thurgood Marshall's story and in her own right a part of the civil rights story of her time. She represented LDF's continuing link to its first Director-Counsel. Cissy was a stalwart supporter of LDF and each of its directors-counsel, and a long-time Board member. On a personal level, I can recall many wonderful times in which she shared her wisdom, her commitment, and her wit. We were blessed to have known her.”

Elaine Jones, LDF's fourth President and Director-Counsel: “Cissy Marshall was an extraordinary, committed, caring, loving, and smart woman. How wonderful that for nearly 30 years after the passing of our founder Thurgood Marshall, his wife of more than 35 years, adopted LDF as one would a wonderful child. She served tirelessly in many different capacities, especially as a stalwart, dependable, hard-working member of the Board. LDF will cherish the life, service, and memory of Cissy Marshall always.”

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Founded in 1940, the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) is the nation's first civil rights law organization. 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 Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Please note that 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.