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LDF Mourns the Loss of Legal Giant and Renowned Law Professor Charles Ogletree

Today, former LDF Board member and renowned professor of law at Harvard Law School, Charles Ogletree, Jr. passed away. He was 70. Professor Ogletree, affectionately known as “Tree,” served on LDF’s Board of Directors from 2009-2015. Closely associated with the evolution of Critical Race Theory, Tree was a giant in the legal academy and a preeminent constitutional scholar.

Born in the segregated yet close-knit community of Merced, California, which he once wrote was “a community short of resources,” Professor Ogletree earned a public school education which led him to attend Stanford University in 1971. There, he became involved with campus activism and politics, after which he went on to attend Harvard Law School during the midst of the conflict over busing and school integration in Boston. After graduating from Harvard Law in 1978, Ogletree moved to Washington, D.C. to represent indigent clients with the city’s Public Defender Service.

In 1985, Ogletree left Washington to become a professor at Harvard Law School, where he taught until his retirement in 2020, while also being known for his representation of Anita Hill during the contentious confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. At Harvard Law, Ogletree mentored countless students who would go on to eminent careers in the private and public sectors — including Barack and Michelle Obama, who counted Ogletree as a friend throughout their time in the White House. His career was also distinguished by his prolific writing about capital punishment and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and he was involved in efforts to secure reparations for 150 survivors and nearly 200 descendants of victims of the 1921 Tulsa race riot, joining a team that filed a 200-page complaint against the city that laid out in great detail the harms done to generations of Black citizens of Tulsa as a result of the riots. In 2005, he launched the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law.

Ogletree, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 2016, was honored with an endowed, named professorship at Harvard Law in 2017. He is survived by his wife, Pamela, as well as children and grandchildren.

In response to Professor Ogletree's passing, LDF issued the following statement:

"We deeply mourn the loss of Professor Ogletree, a legal luminary who contributed his time and brilliance to so many, including at the Legal Defense Fund," said LDF President and Director-Counsel, Janai S. Nelson. "He was an outspoken expert and activist on civil rights, especially as it related to public education and capital punishment. Charles Ogletree devoted his life not only to studying the law, but also to strengthening it. From his campus activism to his time as a public defender, from the Boston busing crisis to the Tulsa reparations case, Professor Ogletree was an academic not content to remain in the ivory tower, bridging the gap between theory and practice to the benefit of countless Americans. His countless accomplishments, contributions to the field of law, and racial justice advocacy will be studied and remembered for decades to come, and his presence will be deeply missed."

"Professor Ogletree was not only a luminary of the racial justice community, he was also a teacher and a mentor who personally invested in creating a new generation of warriors for justice. While his loss will be profoundly felt by all those who were fortunate to benefit from his brilliance, warmth, and commitment to bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice, we must aspire to live up to the legacy he created. I will miss him dearly and will continue to endeavor to honor him in the mission to realize a more just, equal, and perfect union," said LDF Associate Director-Counsel Tona Boyd.

"For so many lawyers Tree was the gold standard of what we could be as modern civil rights lawyers and scholars. He could do it all, and that made many of us believe that we could as well. Tree also set the standard on mentorship. He was a legend at PDS, at Harvard, and in our profession, but he had time and gave an ear to so many who sought his counsel. His loss feels monumental, but we are so grateful to have had his example and guidance," said Former LDF President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill.

"I mourn the passing of my dear friend, my brother in struggle and my stalwart colleague, Charles Ogletree. I have known "Tree" since our law school days, when he was the president of the National Black American Law Students Association (now BLSA) and I served on its Board," said Former LDF President and Director-Counsel Ted Shaw. "During that time, Tree led us in opposition to the *Bakke* case, which was in the Supreme Court. It was apparent then that he was a born leader with a powerful intellect. Tree lived an extraordinary life — D.C. public defender, public intellectual, Harvard Law School professor, teacher of and mentor for generations of lawyers-in-training including Barack and Michelle Obama, attorney for Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas nomination hearings, attorney for survivors of the Tulsa massacre, advocate for black reparations, LDF Board member, and so much more. We walked a long way through life together. Now he walks with the ancestors. I am diminished by his passing, but I am comforted that peace has come to him.

"My thoughts are with Pam, and with Rashida, Charles III and the grandchildren and family. I know that they will be sustained by their memories of Tree as a husband, father, grandfather, and one of our great ones."

“Charles Ogletree possessed in abundance what is too often in short supply: his humanity was in full bloom. He wore his dedication to his fellow humans as a badge of honor. He was committed to equal justice, fair play, deep compassion, and excellence. Those of us fortunate enough to interact with “Tree” will never forget him. There are some lights that are simply never extinguished. His is one of them,” said Former LDF President and Director-Counsel Elaine Jones.

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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.