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LDF Celebrates the Life and Legacy of Claudette Colvin, Trailblazing Civil Rights Pioneer

The [Legal Defense Fund](#) (LDF) mourns the loss, and celebrates the life and legacy, of Claudette Colvin, a historic pioneer in the civil rights movement. Ms. Colvin stood courageously to challenge segregation in Montgomery, Alabama and laid critical groundwork for transformative change across the country. Ms. Colvin passed away at age 86 on Jan. 13, 2026.

At just 15 years old, Ms. Colvin made history when she refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus nearly nine months before Rosa Parks' more widely known protest. Ms. Colvin's refusal to relinquish her seat marked one of the earliest acts of defiance against Jim Crow laws and helped inspire the fight for racial equality.

Ms. Colvin went on to play a critical role in *Browder v. Gayle*, the federal court case that successfully challenged bus segregation in Montgomery. As one of the named plaintiffs, her participation helped secure a landmark ruling that declared segregation on public buses unconstitutional, bringing an end to one of the most visible symbols of state-sanctioned racial discrimination in the South.

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

"We deeply mourn the loss of Claudette Colvin, a courageous and principled woman whose powerful act of resistance helped ignite a movement that pushed America to live up to its highest ideals. At just 15 years old, Ms. Colvin boldly challenged the rampant discrimination of the Jim Crow South at a time when such defiance came at immense personal risk. Her courage reminds us that the pursuit of justice has always been driven by those who stand firm in their convictions, even when history has not yet made space for their names. Ms. Colvin's legacy will continue to inspire future generations in the ongoing fight for equality and justice.

"We extend our deepest condolences to Ms. Colvin's family, loved ones, and all who were shaped by her extraordinary life and unwavering commitment to justice."

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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.