



**For Immediate Release**  
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**LDF Media**  
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**LDF Mourns the Loss of Dr. Norman C. Francis,  
Civil Rights Champion and Longtime Board Member**

The [Legal Defense Fund](#) (LDF) mourns the loss of Dr. Norman C. Francis, a towering advocate for civil rights, educational equity, and social justice. A stalwart civic and higher education leader, Dr. Francis dedicated his life's work to expanding opportunity and strengthening pathways alongside and on behalf of historically oppressed communities. For nearly half a century, Dr. Francis served as a president of Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. Dr. Francis also served as a member of LDF's Board of Directors from 1978 – 1991, and an emeritus member from 1991 to the time of his passing. Dr. Francis was 94 years old at the time of his passing on February 18, 2026.

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

“With heavy hearts, we mourn the loss of Dr. Norman C. Francis and honor his extraordinary life and legacy. An indomitable force, Dr. Francis understood that education is the key not only to accessing opportunity, but to advancing justice. His work demonstrated that equality is secured not only in courtrooms, but cultivated in classrooms, nurtured in communities, and sustained through principled leadership. Because of his vision and moral clarity, generations of Black students were empowered not only to pursue opportunity, but to thrive.

“As a deeply engaged and trusted supporter of LDF, Dr. Francis generously shared his wisdom and time to strengthen our work and sharpen our mission. His deep involvement reflected his lifelong commitment to justice, dignity, and opportunity for all. We are profoundly grateful for Dr. Francis' partnership and friendship, and he will be sorely missed. His transformative legacy will undoubtedly live on through the countless lives he touched. We extend our deepest condolences to his family and loved ones during this difficult time.”

Dr. Norman Christopher Francis was [born](#) on March 20, 1931 in Lafayette, Louisiana. Raised by parents who did not complete high school but instilled in their children an unshakable belief in the power of education, Dr. Francis broke barriers early in his own life as the first Black graduate of Loyola University's New Orleans School of Law.

Dr. Francis carried that same pioneering spirit into public service, where he led Xavier University of Louisiana for 47 years as the university's first Black president, first lay president, and the second Black president of a Catholic university in the country. There, Dr. Francis [transformed](#) the institution into a national leader in producing Black physicians, scientists, and public servants. During his tenure, the historically Black Catholic university gained a national reputation and prestige, expanding its campus, enrollment, and endowment. Dr. Francis also served as president of the United Negro College Fund.

Beyond higher education, Dr. Francis was known for his steadfast public and community service efforts. Dr. Francis led the Louisiana Recovery Authority as chairman following Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita, where he worked to ensure that rebuilding efforts centered equity and long-term opportunity. Dr. Francis was also a United States Army veteran.

Dr. Francis' philanthropic efforts at LDF and other civil rights organizations cemented his legacy as a visionary for equal opportunity and justice. In 2006, Dr. Francis [received](#) the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Dr. Francis is [survived by](#) his six children and eleven grandchildren. His beloved wife, Blanche Francis, preceded him in death in 2015.

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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. |*