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LDF Mourns the Loss of Renowned Activist and Artist Harry Belafonte

The [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) is deeply saddened by the death of Harry Belafonte, a legendary social activist, artist, and actor. Belafonte died at 96 years old on April 25, 2023 in his Manhattan, New York home.

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

“We mourn the death of the civil and human rights icon and renowned artist, Harry Belafonte, and extend our deepest condolences to his loved ones. Born to immigrant parents in Harlem in the 1920s and living in Jamaica for a time, Mr. Belafonte utilized his trans-continental experience and the severe discrimination he faced as a child to fuel a passion for inspiring change around the world — most notably through working to advance racial equality in the United States and protect human rights around the globe.

“With his captivating voice that famed him the ‘Calypso King,’ Mr. Belafonte relayed to the world a clear, resounding message of justice and freedom. Playing an integral role in the civil rights movement, Mr. Belafonte traveled throughout the South and alongside the NAACP to advance racial justice, taking an active role in some of the movement’s most critical moments. He was present alongside protestors during the Freedom Rides and helped finance their work, met with and funded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and was present with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he gave his famous ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.

“As part of his international human rights advocacy, Mr. Belafonte joined forces with South African President Nelson Mandela to fight against apartheid. Moreover, he played a key role in forming USA for Africa, raising millions of dollars alongside other artists for hunger relief. Mr. Belafonte also memorably became a goodwill ambassador at UNICEF, serving as a chairman for the International Symposium of Artists and Intellectuals for African Children to advocate for social justice.

“In addition to his steadfast human and civil rights work, Mr. Belafonte left an indelible mark on the performing arts. Describing the arts as ‘the greatest liberator of Black people,’ Mr. Belafonte set afoot a path that opened doors of opportunity for Black artists, energizing and inspiring a new generation of dreamers and changemakers.

“Widely regarded for his contributions to our world, society, and culture, Mr. Belafonte, alongside his friend Sidney Poitier, was awarded the first Thurgood Marshall Lifetime Achievement Award by LDF in 1993. In 2019, Mr. Belafonte was honored with the Spirit of Justice Award, accepted by Cicely Tyson, presented for his immense service to advancing racial justice.”

“For Mr. Belafonte, who emphasized that he ‘was an activist that became an artist, not an artist that became an activist,’ the inspiration for his work came with ease. The magnitude of his life, and this loss, cannot be overstated. Mr. Belafonte demonstrated how, without fear and compromise, people can use their platforms for good. He will be missed, and his ineffaceable legacy will leave a resounding impact on the minds, hearts, and lives of generations to come.”

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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.*