

LDF Mourns the Loss of Congressman John Lewis, Legendary and Beloved Civil Rights Icon

Today, LDF mourns the loss of The Honorable John Lewis, an esteemed member of Congress and revered civil rights icon with whom our organization has a deeply personal history. Mr. Lewis passed away on July 17, 2020, following a battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 80 years old.

“I don’t know of another leader in this country with the moral standing of Rep. John Lewis. His life and work helped shape the best of our national identity,” said Sherrilyn Ifill, LDF’s President & Director-Counsel. “We revered him not only for his work and sacrifices during the Civil Rights Movement, but because of his unending, stubborn, brilliant determination to press for justice and equality in this country.

“There was no cynicism in John Lewis; no hint of despair even in the darkest moments. Instead, he showed up relentlessly with commitment and determination - but also love, and joy and unwavering dedication to the principles of non-violence. He spoke up and sat-in and stood on the front lines – and risked it all. This country – every single person in this country – owes a debt of gratitude to John Lewis that we can only begin to repay by following his demand that we do more as citizens. That we ‘get in the way.’ That we ‘speak out when we see injustice’ and that we keep our ‘eyes on the prize.’”

The son of sharecroppers, Mr. Lewis was born on Feb. 21, 1940, outside of Troy, Alabama. He grew up attending segregated public schools in the state’s Pike County and, as a boy, was inspired by the work of civil rights activists, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and those leading the Montgomery bus boycott. He left home to attend the American Baptist Theological Seminary, and attended Troy State and then Fisk University. Lewis often spoke of his initiation into civil rights work. He wrote a letter to Dr. King, whose preaching and teaching he followed. Mr. Lewis wrote in his memoir “Walking in the Wind,” that Dr. King was “everything I wanted to be.”

“... When I would visit a little town of Troy, and visit Montgomery and Tuskegee, other small towns in Alabama, I saw the signs that read: white, colored, white waiting, colored waiting, white men, colored men, white women, colored women. I saw segregation, I didn’t like it,” Mr. Lewis said when reflecting on his early years during a 2002 court testimony. “In 1955, when I was 15 years old, in the 10th grade, I heard of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. And hearing Dr. King’s voice on an old radio inspired me to find a way to get involved in the civil rights movement.”

Mr. Lewis received a response to his letter to Dr. King – an invitation to meet the leader in Montgomery, Alabama. At that meeting, Dr. King jokingly referred to Mr. Lewis as “the boy from Troy.” Their friendship would last for the remainder of Dr. King’s life.

Mr. Lewis received a bachelor’s degree in Religion and Philosophy from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Representative Lewis first became directly involved in civil rights activism through protest movements that pointedly emphasized non-violence. He joined a group of students conducting segregated lunch counter sit-ins in Nashville in 1959 and, despite enduring extensive physical and verbal harassment, these students were ultimately successful in desegregating many of the city’s lunch counters.

In 1961, Mr. Lewis [joined the Freedom Riders](#), a group traveling by bus around the country to ensure that the Supreme Court decision banning discrimination in transportation services was upheld. During this time, Mr. Lewis and his fellow activists were repeatedly physically attacked and imprisoned, but they remained steadfast in their objective. The Freedom Riders ultimately played an enormous role in securing the passage of the Interstate Commerce Commission's ruling banning segregation in public transportation.

In 1963, Representative Lewis became the national chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a role which earned him national attention. While in this position, Mr. Lewis was named one of the "Big Six" leaders organizing the 1963 March on Washington, the famed civil and economic rights march during which Dr. King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech on the National Mall. Mr. Lewis also [delivered a speech](#) that day and, at 23 years old, was the youngest individual to make remarks at the event.

As part of his work with the SNCC, Mr. Lewis also spearheaded "Freedom Summer" – or "Mississippi Summer" as it was then called – a 1964 voter registration campaign for Black Americans in Mississippi. In 1965, he helped lead and organize the Selma to Montgomery marches to advocate for African American voting rights and, in the process, became a nationally recognized figure for his heroic activism. During the first attempted march on March 7, 1965 – a day now known as "Bloody Sunday" – Mr. Lewis and fellow activists were attacked by Alabama state troopers as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge. During the attack, Mr. Lewis sustained a skull fracture – an injury from which he had visible scars for the rest of his life. Despite his severe injury at the time, Mr. Lewis made his way back across the bridge and delivered powerful remarks outside of a church in Selma. "I don't see how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam — I don't see how he can send troops to the Congo — I don't see how he can send troops to Africa and can't send troops to Selma," Mr. Lewis powerfully asserted.

Following this initial march attempt, LDF worked alongside Mr. Lewis and other activists to ensure that the Selma to Montgomery march would ultimately succeed. LDF and co-counsel filed a lawsuit, *Wallace v. Williams*, in which the judge ordered that marchers needed to be protected by federal officials. LDF lawyers, including former Director-Counsel Jack Greenberg, worked with the activists to draft a march plan to submit to the court that would ensure a safe and secure march route from Selma to Montgomery. This plan became part of the court's order allowing the march to finally go forward to completion on to Montgomery on the third and final attempt in late March.

The Selma marches – and Mr. Lewis' courageous leadership – transformed the voting rights movement. Following the first two Selma marches, President Johnson convened a joint session of Congress and introduced the Voting Rights Act – and implored legislators to pass the bill. The president also went on national television to express admiration for the courageousness of Mr. Lewis and fellow marchers and called on Americans to heed their message. The Voting Rights Act was ultimately [passed in 1965](#) by an overwhelmingly bipartisan congressional vote. It has been regarded as the most important and successful civil rights legislation ever enacted. A key provision of the Act was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013, unleashing a wave of voter suppression around the country. Mr. Lewis worked tirelessly until his death to encourage Congress to pass an amendment to the Act to repair the damage done by the Court's decision.

Beyond voting, LDF also represented Mr. Lewis in several other civil rights matters. LDF founder and first Director-Counsel Thurgood Marshall served as a member of the LDF team representing Mr. Lewis and fellow freedom riders in *Lewis v. Southeastern Greyhound* in 1961. LDF acted as counsel for Mr. Lewis and his co-protesters in several other cases in 1965 — *Boynton v. Clark*, *Boynton v. Thomas*, and *Alabama ex rel Wallace v. Lewis* — following their arrests for voter registration and unequal education-related protests.

In 1966, Mr. Lewis left his role at the SNCC, though he remained heavily involved in civil rights activism. He served as the Associate Director of the Field Foundation, a social change organization focusing on racial justice, and, later, as the Director of the Voter Education Project (VEP), where he spearheaded an initiative that registered over 400 million voters of color.

Mr. Lewis continued to attract national attention and respect because of his ceaseless work to advance civil rights and, in 1977, President Jimmy Carter appointed him to lead ACTION, the former federal volunteer agency. After Carter's administration ended, Mr. Lewis became an elected official for the first time after securing a seat on Atlanta's City Council in 1981. As a local councilman, he advocated for governmental reforms and neighborhood preservation.

In 1986, Mr. Lewis ran for the congressional seat that he would ultimately hold for the remainder of his life — that of Georgia's Fifth District. As a congressman, Mr. Lewis was immensely popular, winning reelection 16 times and only receiving less than 70% of the vote one time in that period. He also held key leadership roles over the years, serving as Senior Chief Deputy Whip for the Democratic Party and as a member of the esteemed House Ways and Means Committee.

During his long tenure as a congressman, Mr. Lewis remained heavily committed to protecting voting rights for all Americans. He was instrumental in securing the repeated reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) and, after the Supreme Court's decision in 2013 by *Shelby v. Holder* struck down a key provision of the Voting Rights Act he fought tirelessly to attempt to restore the protections of this historic legislation.

“... The Rights Act (VRA) had been hailed by historians as one of the most impactful and effective actions of Congress in the last half century,” Representative Lewis said on the 2019 anniversary of the VRA's passage. But, he added, “we must confront the fact that there are forces in our society that want to reverse that democratic legacy ...”

Mr. Lewis continued, “All we have to do is say no to this tyranny and begin to stand up and speak out for the heritage of equality and justice most Americans believe in. In the days when leaders fail us, when the work of many in government is division and separation, and when corporations are only interested in the cost of widgets above the value of human life, the onus falls on each and every one of us to do what is right, what is fair and what is just. Members of Congress who truly believe in democracy must stay in the struggle to demand that the Senate take up House initiatives to repair the VRA.”

During the Trump administration, Mr. Lewis also underscored the importance of fighting to preserve America's democratic principles when he announced his support for impeaching President Trump – during a time when many of his colleagues were looking to the longstanding congressman for guidance.

“Our nation is founded on the principle that we do not have kings. We have presidents. And the Constitution is our compass. When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something. To do something,” Mr. Lewis said during an [emotional speech](#) on the House floor in December 2019. “Our children and their children will ask us, ‘What did you do? What did you say?’ For some, this vote may be hard. But we have a mission and a mandate to be on the right side of history.”

Throughout his storied career as an activist and elected official, Mr. Lewis received many esteemed awards and honors, something to which the [biography](#) on his congressional website attests. LDF awarded Mr. Lewis its Thurgood Marshall Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005, during its voting rights-themed annual National Equal Justice Dinner that year. He was awarded the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#), the nation's highest civilian honor, by President Barack Obama in 2011. The National Constitution Center awarded Mr. Lewis the Liberty Medal in 2016, where LDF's Ifill [spoke about his legacy](#).

Mr. Lewis was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in December 2019, and he announced the news with his characteristic strength and determination. "I have been in some kind of fight — for freedom, equality, basic human rights — for nearly my entire life. I have never faced a fight quite like the one I have now," Mr. Lewis asserted in a press statement at the time. " ... So I have decided to do what I know to do and do what I have always done: I am going to fight it and keep fighting for the Beloved Community. We still have many bridges to cross. To my constituents: being your representative in Congress is the honor of a lifetime ... I may miss a few votes during this period, but with God's grace I will be back on the front lines soon."

The nationwide outpouring of support following Mr. Lewis' announcement was a testament to the immense respect and support bestowed upon Mr. Lewis from fellow politicians, activists, constituents, and many members of the American public. For LDF, Mr. Lewis will always remain an iconic part of our institutional history. We worked in tandem with him at the height of the civil rights movement, standing alongside him as he broke barriers and forever changed the lives of African Americans by securing long overdue equality and justice for all.

Mr. Lewis represented the very soul of the civil rights movement and his loss is profoundly felt by those in this community and beyond. We extend our sincerest condolences to Mr. Lewis' loved ones at this difficult time and forever honor his legacy as a civil rights pioneer.