



**For Immediate Release**  
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**LDF Statement on the Passing of Judge Damon J. Keith of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit**

This morning, the Honorable Damon J. Keith of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit passed away at the age of 96. A grandson of slaves, Judge Keith rose from humble roots in Detroit to attend Howard University School of Law, where he studied under NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) founder Thurgood Marshall. After earning a Master of Law degree from Wayne State University Law School, Judge Keith was nominated by President Lyndon Johnson to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan in 1967, and was nominated by President Jimmy Carter to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in 1977. All told, Judge Keith spent over five decades on the bench, writing critical decisions that touched all areas of civil rights.

Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel at LDF, issued the following statement:

“Judge Damon Keith was one of that band of brilliant, courageous African-American federal judges appointed in the late 1960s and 1970s whose jurisprudence, eloquence, and dignity set a standard of excellence. A grandson of slaves, he rose from working as a janitor to become one of the most distinguished jurists in the country. His trenchant opinions spanned the breadth of civil rights, consistently voicing his unyielding commitment to equality under the law and applying it to voting rights, education equity, employment discrimination, sexual harassment, immigrants’ rights, and a myriad of other issues gripping our nation. Judge Keith had an unfailing respect for civil liberties, writing in one opinion the now famous line, “Democracies die behind closed doors.” His uncompromising moral clarity made him an extraordinary force on the federal bench, steadfastly rejecting the constraints opponents of civil rights sought to place on him and other judges of color.

“LDF enjoyed a special connection to Judge Keith. A litany of distinguished LDF alumni first clerked for Judge Keith, including Lani Guinier, the trailblazing voting rights litigator, scholar, and Harvard Law School Professor; Connie Rice, who was based in LDF’s Los Angeles office in the 1980s and 1990s, and later co-founded the Advancement Project; and Gailon McGowen, who litigated voting rights cases at LDF in the 1990s. Two current lawyers on our staff are former Keith clerks as well.

“A legal giant and paragon of the profession, Judge Keith’s record sets a powerful example for the generations of attorneys whose careers will be shaped by his service to this country. With profound sadness, we offer our deepest condolences to his loved ones, particularly his daughters Cecile Keith Brown, Debbie Keith, and Gilda Keith and granddaughters Nia Keith Brown and Camara Keith Brown.”

Ajmel Quereshi, Senior Counsel at LDF and former clerk to Judge Keith, issued the following statement:

“I was lucky enough to clerk for Judge Keith, and what I will remember most about his remarkable life is that he was a trailblazer on countless social justice issues. No matter the issue – racial justice, women's rights, Islamophobia, immigrants' rights – you could be certain he was on the side of justice. Judge Keith’s commitment to civil rights expanded beyond his incisive decisions and permeated the entirety of his professional life. He championed clerks of color, giving so many young lawyers a chance when few others would. He will be dearly missed, and I am endlessly grateful for the opportunity he gave me and the wisdom he imparted. I offer my sincerest condolences to his family.”

Earl Kirkland, John Payton Appellate and Supreme Court Advocacy Fellow at LDF and former clerk to Judge Keith, issued the following statement:

“Judge Keith spent the entirety of his distinguished career on the bench enforcing the principle that equal justice for all should be a reality rather than a concept. Time and time again, he crusaded for justice – even when facing animus from those who disfavored equity – as evidenced through his numerous landmark cases. I am forever grateful to Judge Keith for his unyielding commitment to guarding our civil liberties. My thoughts and prayers are with his family.”

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*Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization and 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. 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 NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.*

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