



LDF Remembers Judge Damon J. Keith

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) mourns the loss of former board member and trailblazing federal Judge Damon J. Keith, who passed away on April 28th at the age of 96. Over the course of his remarkable career, Judge Keith wrote key decisions in cases that spanned the breadth of civil rights, including rulings that made real the promises of the U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and opinions curtailing government surveillance.

“Judge Keith was a legal giant, paragon of the profession, and 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,” said LDF President and Director-Counsel [Sherrilyn Ifill](#). “His unfailing respect for civil liberties, reflected in an [opinion](#) by the now famous line, ‘Democracies die behind closed doors,’ sets a powerful example for the generations of attorneys whose careers will be shaped by his service to this country.”

A grandson of slaves, Judge Keith was born in Detroit, Michigan, on July 4, 1922. He became the first member of his family to attend college – West Virginia State College – before fighting in World War II. After serving the United States overseas, Judge Keith attended Howard University School of Law, where he studied under LDF founder Thurgood Marshall. In an interview with the [Detroit News](#), Judge Keith remembered the advice offered by future Supreme Court Justice Marshall:

"He told us at Howard's law school that 'equal justice under law,' those four words etched in the Supreme Court, were written by white men, and when you leave this law school as lawyers, make the country live up to it ... those words 'equal justice under law.'"

Judge Keith would go on to earn a Master of Law degree from Wayne State University Law School in Detroit. On June 10, 1965, he was elected as an LDF Board member, where his guidance helped the organization advance

the difficult work of racial justice. Judge Keith was nominated by President Lyndon Johnson in 1967 to serve on the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan. In November 1971, newly adopted court administrative rules prevented federal judges from serving on the boards of organizations who might be potential litigants. While this rule caused Judge Keith withdraw his seat on the board, he never waived his support for LDF. In his letter of resignation Judge Keith wrote, "...I do this reluctantly because I believe in the Legal Defense Fund and all that it stands for and has stood for through the years."

In 1977, Judge Keith was nominated to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit by President Jimmy Carter. Throughout his storied career, which spanned over five decades on the federal bench, Judge Keith wrote critical decisions and was the longest-serving Black Judge in the nation.

He was still offering incisive opinions at the age of 93, when he penned one of the most powerful dissents ever written in a voting rights case. In *Husted v. A. Phillip Randolph Institute*, which challenged Ohio's voter purge provision, Judge Keith augmented his brilliant legal analysis with a devastating account of the line of martyrs who died in the fight for voting rights, even including photos of slain activists. His words in that [opinion](#) were a direct challenge to contemporary voter suppression schemes:

"I will not forget. I cannot forget – indeed America cannot forget – the pain, the suffering, the sorrow of those who died for equal protection and for this precious right to vote."

Reflecting on the many ways Judge Keith remains connected to LDF, Ms. Ifill added, "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."

The wide-range of issues championed by Judge Keith over the years was particularly meaningful to former clerk and LDF Senior Counsel [Ajmel Quereshi](#), who said, "...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.”