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LDF Mourns the Loss of James Ferguson, Beloved Civil Rights Champion

The [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) mourns the loss of James “Fergie” Ferguson II, a beloved civil rights champion and steadfast advocate whose extraordinary legal advocacy reshaped the fight for racial justice in North Carolina and beyond. From an early age, Ferguson demonstrated a tireless commitment to civil rights, helping to form the Ashville Student Committee on Racial Equality (ASCORE), a student chapter of the national CORE, as a teenager. A pioneering legal mind, Ferguson co-founded North Carolina’s first racially integrated law firm Chambers, Stein, Ferguson, & Lanning with the late Julius Chambers, LDF’s third President and Director-Counsel. Ferguson’s tireless work, both inside and outside the courtroom, spanned over fifty years during which he led transformative legal battles in school desegregation, criminal defense, and death penalty reform. Ferguson was also a powerful advocate during apartheid as a co-founder of South Africa’s first Trial Advocacy program, who South African President Nelson Mandela highly regarded.

LDF had the privilege of knowing Ferguson closely throughout his lifelong commitment to justice, as recounted in LDF’s oral history and archival project [“Recollection”](#). Ferguson served as co-counsel in numerous civil rights cases, supported the Marshall-Motley Scholars Program (MMSp), and was a dedicated mentor to generations of lawyers. In 2019, Ferguson successfully argued *North Carolina v. Augustine* before the North Carolina Supreme Court as part of the historic defense of the Racial Justice Act of 2009 (RJA), which the North Carolina Legislature attempted to retroactively appeal in 2013. The Court ultimately vacated Augustine’s death sentence and allowed all RJA claims filed before 2013, including those filed by almost the entire North Carolina Death Row, to move forward. His work in this case and others, including *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, *Thornburg v. Gingles*, and his defense of the Wilmington Ten, exemplify his fearless commitment to justice. Ferguson passed away on July 21, 2025, at 82 years old.

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

“With heavy hearts, we mourn the loss of James ‘Fergie’ Ferguson—a dear friend, a trusted colleague, and an inspiring pillar of the civil rights community. A towering luminary of legal brilliance, relentless advocacy, and unshakeable purpose, Fergie was someone who lived his commitment to justice every day both in the courtroom and beyond. Alongside his cherished friend Julius Chambers, Fergie helped build North Carolina’s first integrated law firm, forging a path that transformed civil rights in the South. His work touched the lives of so many—from leading important school desegregation cases to mentoring young lawyers through the Marshall-Motley Scholars Program, which he supported with passion and care. LDF is profoundly grateful for his partnership, his generosity, and enduring spirit over the years.

“Our deepest condolences and sympathies are with Fergie’s family, loved ones, and all whose lives he impacted. We are forever touched and inspired by his lifelong dedication to justice, a shining example that will continue to guide and strengthen us in the formidable fight ahead. Rest in praise and power, Fergie.”