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LDF Mourns the Loss of Ronald J. Tabak, a Fierce and Treasured Criminal Justice Advocate

The [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) mourns the loss of Ronald J. Tabak, a dynamic attorney, criminal justice advocate, and civil rights champion who dedicated his career to exposing the injustices in capital punishment cases.

In 1985, Tabak joined Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and Affiliates. At the international law firm, Tabak developed Skadden's renowned pro bono program. Since its inception in 1988, the program has helped prove the innocence of thousands of people through innovative outreach and effective partnerships with legal aid organizations. For decades, Tabak's work, both inside and outside the courtroom, sought to expose the shortcomings and biases of the justice system while working towards more just solutions.

Tabak worked with LDF on two notable cases. The first was the 1985 Supreme Court victory, *Franklin v. Franklin*. The case addressed a violation of the due process clause and re-emphasized the need for precise and clear jury instructions to prevent shifting the burden of proof. Tabak was also a part of the legal team on *State of Georgia v. Gates*, which secured the innocence of Johnny Gates, who was falsely accused of a murder that took place in 1976. Gates spent 26 years on death row, and, in 2019, a new trial led to the finding of undeniable racial discrimination in the original case. Tabak was key in Gates' removal from death row by establishing his innocence because of an intellectual disability. This victory was informed by the precedent-setting case of *Atkins v. Virginia* in 2002, when Tabak and his team's arguments led the Supreme Court to rule that sentencing those with intellectual disabilities to the death penalty constitutes cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth Amendment.

Tabak served on numerous committees and boards, including the American Bar Association's (ABA) Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice's Death Penalty Committee, the New York City Bar Association's Capital Punishment Committee, and LatinoJustice PRLDEF, among others. Tabak also served as a special adviser to the ABA Death Penalty Due Process Review Project, which advances research and educates decision-makers and the public on death penalty laws and processes to ensure fairness and accuracy in death penalty systems. Tabak passed away on July 22, 2025, at 75 years old. He will be remembered for his wisdom, kindness, and unwavering support for justice and the abolition of capital punishment.

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

“We are deeply saddened by the loss of Ronald J. Tabak, a beloved civil rights champion and leader in the crusade to abolish the death penalty. Ron’s brilliance and unwavering commitment to justice helped transform the lives of those who faced the darkest aspects of our criminal legal system, while his mentorship and warm spirit inspired so many of us who were similarly moved to end the scourge of capital punishment. May his memory and accomplishments forever exemplify how the pursuit of justice can carry you to unprecedented heights.

“Our deepest condolences and sympathies are with Ron’s family, loved ones, and all whose lives he impacted. LDF is immensely grateful for his talents, dedication, and partnership.”

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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.