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LDF President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill Receives American Bar Association's Spirit of Excellence Award

Today, the American Bar Association (ABA) recognized Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel of the [NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.](https://www.naacpldf.org/) (LDF), with its 2021 Spirit of Excellence Award.

The award is presented to the lawyers who excel in their professional settings, personify excellence on the national and international level, and have demonstrated a commitment to racial and ethnic diversity in the legal profession. Under Ms. Ifill's leadership, LDF has intensified its litigation challenging voter suppression, racial discrimination in the criminal justice system and housing discrimination, and has led the resistance against federal efforts to roll back civil rights gains in areas such as affirmative action, employment discrimination, and school discipline policies.

"I accept this recognition not just for myself but on behalf of the entire team at the Legal Defense Fund, which works tirelessly every day to defend the civil rights of Black communities across the country," said Ms. Ifill in her acceptance remarks. "Our staff epitomizes the spirit of excellence that is the name of this award."

Ms. Ifill continued, "Our work has been intense and reached an unprecedented level in 2020, as we were forced to expand our efforts to ensure the safety of our communities during a deadly global pandemic that has disproportionately impacted Black people. We redoubled our efforts to ensure that Black voters had expanded opportunities to vote safely by mail and that every ballot was counted. We focused on the other ongoing crises of the past year – massive evictions and foreclosures, educational equity during remote learning, and the humanitarian crisis currently taking place in our nation's prisons, especially those in the South.

"It has been a difficult year for many, including for organizations focused on the rule of law during a time when we've seen attacks on what we hold dear coming at us from all sides. As many of you know, I have been hard on our profession over the past four years. I have expressed my disappointment with the failures of lawyers and the institutions of our profession to speak clearly and unequivocally when the actions of lawyers have violated the principles of equality and justice to which we have all pledged ourselves... Of course, many in our profession have performed at an exemplary level. Civil rights and civil liberties lawyers have been extraordinarily heroic during this period. But this has not been true across the board and our country – our democracy – has been weakened as a result.

"The words 'Equal Justice Under Law' etched on the frontage of the United States Supreme Court is one of the most awesome sites for any lawyer approaching the court. But those words are not a statement of fact – they are a command, an admonition, an aspiration, and a challenge.

“And so I challenge you. To stop talking about diversity and inclusion and to make it happen. To stop talking about criminal justice reform and to do your part to change a system so riven with racism and arbitrary cruelty that it shames our nation. Stop talking about the rule of law and speak out when those in high places abuse the legal process and violate the law with impunity. Now more than at any time in decades, we must live up to the highest ideals of our profession, and I challenge us to take this on in 2021.”

Alongside Ms. Ifill, other 2021 Spirit of Excellence Award recipients include Barbara L. Creel, a Professor at the University of New Mexico School of Law, Román D. Hernández, managing partner of Troutman Pepper’s Portland office, Lori E. Lightfoot, the first Black female mayor of Chicago, and John C. Yang, president and executive director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

Ms. Ifill became LDF’s seventh President and Director-Counsel in 2013 and is only the second woman to lead the organization. Elaine Jones, herself an ABA Spirit of Excellence Award recipient was LDF’s first female director-counsel. In 2020, LDF filed several suits challenging efforts to [disenfranchise](#) or otherwise make it more difficult for Black Americans and other citizens to vote, brought [litigation](#) against a Trump Administration Executive Order that would constrain free speech on issues of race and diversity, fought for citizens peacefully protesting police violence, and continued to carry out its mandate as the nation’s premier defender of civil rights and racial justice as issues of inequality were brought to the fore. Under Ms. Ifill’s tenure, LDF has also advanced its public advocacy campaigns and research development through the establishment of the [Thurgood Marshall Institute](#).

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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. 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. 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. Follow LDF on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).