



LDF Remembers Talbot “Sandy” D’Alemberte

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) mourns the passing of former Board member and president of the American Bar Association (ABA) Talbot “Sandy” D’Alemberte, who passed away at the age of 85 on May 20, 2019. Over the course of his inspiring career, D’Alemberte championed the causes of civil and human rights, and set a standard for leadership and service in the legal profession.

D’Alemberte devoted much of his life to promoting access to justice for all, and tackled head on issues of race in the criminal justice system. In addition to working with LDF as co-counsel in the death penalty case [Barclay v. Florida](#), he served on LDF’s Board from 1985-1996 and remained involved as a Board member emeritus.

“Sandy not only possessed a brilliant legal mind, but also the indispensable ability to shape the next generation of legal thinkers and practitioners to best serve the cause of equal justice,” said LDF President and Director-Counsel [Sherrilyn Ifill](#). “In his myriad leadership positions, Sandy grounded vital institutions with his integrity as well as his unshakable commitment to civil and human rights. On LDF’s Board he leveraged his vast expertise in management and social justice to help spur our continued growth and success. Since becoming Director-Counsel, I’ve treasured Sandy’s supportive and encouraging emails, which always arrived unprompted but at precisely the right moments.”

D’Alemberte was born in Tallahassee, Florida in 1933, and spent his youth jumping from one military base to another due to his father’s Army service. He went to high school in the small Florida town of Chattahoochee before briefly leaving the state to attend the University of the South, where he majored in political science. After getting his degree, D’Alemberte served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy Reserve, and then matriculated at the University of Florida College of Law.

Following graduation, D’Alemberte moved to Miami to join the law firm of Steel Hector and Davis. Shortly after his arrival in the city, D’Alemberte was elected to the House of Representatives. He worked on countless issues in the House from 1966-1972, and later chaired the Florida Constitution Revision Commission, where he wrote a judicial article for the Florida Constitution that remains relatively unchanged since it was penned nearly a half century ago.

After his time in the legislature and on the Constitution Revision Commission, D’Alemberte remained active as an attorney. In his book, *Crusaders In The Courts*, former LDF Director-Counsel [Jack Greenberg](#) wrote of D’Alemberte’s work alongside LDF attorney and later Associate Director-Counsel [James M. Nabrit, III](#) in *Barclay*. Together, D’Alemberte and

Nabrit brought the case to the Florida Supreme Court, where, by a vote of 4-3, the justices ruled that the defendant had not been represented effectively on his original appeal. D'Alemberte and Nabrit's dogged advocacy saved Barclay's life, and he was resentenced to life imprisonment.

D'Alemberte and Nabrit enjoyed a decades-long close friendship until Nabrit's death in 2013.

In 1984, D'Alemberte was made dean of Florida State University's (FSU) College of Law, and he served as a professor there for decades. As dean, he helped instill a commitment to public service by implementing a pro bono requirement for all students. At the time, it was only the second program of its kind in the country.

After completing his service as dean of FSU's College of Law, D'Alemberte led the effort to urge the Florida Supreme Court to clarify that all members of the state's bar have an obligation to provide legal services to those who could not otherwise afford counsel when ordered to do so by the court. He extended his plea to the pages of the *University of Florida Journal of Law and Public Policy*, where he expressed his fervent commitment to access to justice: "lawyers have a legal and ethical obligation to see that justice is done." Ultimately, he became so synonymous with the effort that it was known as the "D'Alemberte Petition."

From 1991-1992, he served as president of the ABA. He led the organization during the Rodney King riots, after which the ABA formed the Task Force on Minorities and the Justice System. In an article in the *ABA Journal*, D'Alemberte laid out the numerous injustices in the legal system that the Task Force found to be plaguing communities of color in particular. After laying out the stark realities, he issued a call to action to his fellow members of the bar, noting that:

"We need to overcome the resignation and indifference that has gained ground recently. We need to examine the problems of racial and ethnic inequality in our justice system and identify practical steps to solve them... As lawyers called to administer justice, we cannot afford to do anything less."

D'Alemberte's time leading the ABA also coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union. After the Berlin Wall crumbled, he co-founded the Central and East European Law Initiative (CEELI), a volunteer program that provides free legal services to emerging democracies as they formulate constitutional and judicial frameworks to enshrine civil and human rights.

While at the helm of the ABA, D'Alemberte continued to be an advocate for those who needed representation most. In addition to serving on the ABA's Task Force looking into post-conviction relief, he argued [Herrera v. Collins](#) before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1993. Although he was unsuccessful in convincing the Court that a person's claim of actual innocence was grounds for relief from a death sentence, he took the fight for innocence to the Senate. The following year, he [testified](#) alongside former LDF President and Director-Counsel [Elaine Jones](#) and called on senators to pass legislation making available some method, "for innocent people to bring their evidence to court."

In 1994, D'Alemberte returned to FSU as the school's 12th president. In that important role, which he served in until 2003, he established the school's Center for the Advancement of Human Rights.

Throughout his career, D'Alemberte won countless awards, including a 1985 Emmy Award for his efforts in support of open government, which led to the introduction of cameras in the courtroom; the 2003 ABA Medal, the organization's highest honor for his work creating CEELI; the International Bar Association's Rule of Law Award; and the 2007 Tobias Simon Pro Bono Service Award, which recognizes extraordinary efforts to offer legal services to those who could not afford it otherwise.

D'Alemberte continued to be active in various communities until the end of his life, even teaching spring semester courses at the FSU College of Law this year. He is survived by his wife, Patsy; daughter, Gabrielle; and son, Josh.