



A Tribute to LDF Alum Sheila Thomas

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) mourns the loss of Sheila Y. Thomas, who was a member of LDF's inaugural class of Skadden Fellows. An accomplished attorney who litigated countless employment discrimination cases over her decades-long career, Thomas also worked as a spiritual counselor, viewing religious practice as inseparable from the pursuit of justice. She passed away on August 9 after a battle with cancer.

“For Sheila Thomas, the law was a vocation in the truest sense of the word,” said Sherrilyn Ifill, LDF President and Director-Counsel. “Her goal was never simply to win cases; it was to make justice a reality in the lives of ordinary women and men. Throughout her remarkable career as both a litigator and counselor, she accomplished exactly that. Her passing is a loss not only for those of us who were fortunate to know her, but to a world in desperate need of meaningful justice and true compassion. She will be sorely missed.”



(Sheila Thomas and LDF alumnus and retired Chief Judge U.W. Clemon of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Alabama at the LDF 75th Reunion Event)

Thomas was a graduate of Yale University and the Georgetown University Law Center. After earning her J.D., Thomas joined LDF's Washington, D.C. office in August of 1989 as part of the organization's first cohort of Skadden Fellows. During her two years at LDF, she participated in a 1989 challenge to Arkansas's legislative redistricting plan – resulting in what was then the largest redistricting ever ordered under the Voting Rights Act – and two major employment discrimination cases *Patterson v. McLean Credit Union* and *Lytle v. Schwitzer*.

Thomas left LDF in 1991 to enter private practice, joining Saperstein, Goldstein, Demchak & Baller, a San Francisco-based employment class-action law firm. In the early 2000s, she served as director of litigation at Equal Rights Advocates, Inc. a women's advocacy group, where she continued her focus on employment discrimination. Thomas also dedicated her time to a number of boards as co-chair of Civil Rights Committee of American Bar Association (ABA) Individual Rights & Responsibilities Section, a member of the executive committee of ABA on Civil Rights & Social Justice and the Impact Fund & Advancement Project. Eventually, she opened her own practice in Oakland, CA, helping to litigate *Dukes v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.*, in which nearly 1.5 million women sued the world's largest private employer for systematic discrimination. The case reached the Supreme Court in 2011, resulting in a controversial 5-4 decision in Wal-Mart's favor. She often partnered with LDF in her work, notably joining an LDF delegation [to a 2012 White House meeting](#) about the alarming number of vacancies on the federal judiciary.

“Sheila Thomas’ commitment to her clients and her craft both as an LDF lawyer and later in private practice demonstrated excellence, commitment and thorough preparation,” said former LDF President and Director-Counsel [Elaine Jones](#). “For over 30 years she handled cases that removed discriminatory barriers and increased fairness in the workplace for countless employees. We owe her gratitude for employing her finely-honed skills and considerable talents in enforcing the nation’s civil rights laws on behalf of us all.”

In 2003, Thomas began working as a spiritual counselor in addition to her legal practice. In 2011, she began pursuing a master's degree in divinity at the Pacific School of Religion – a choice, she later wrote, that “baffled” some of her friends and colleagues. Although she admitted to her own doubts about studying for a master's while maintaining her legal practice – the work, she wrote, often amounted to two full-time jobs – she was firm in her conviction that her spiritual interests complemented her work as a lawyer. In a [2015 blog post](#), she wrote, “Working as a lawyer with my colleagues on civil rights issues, I notice that many civil rights advocates make a concerted effort to separate religion and/or spiritual matters from the specific legal, social and political issues on which they focus. For me, as a licensed spiritual counselor and a practicing attorney, the two are intertwined. Although I do not overtly talk about religion and/or spirituality with my legal clients, I bring both sets of skills to the table as I serve them, because my spiritual practices inform who I am in every aspect of my life.” She earned her M.Div. in 2014.



(Sheila Thomas)

In July of 2017, Thomas closed her legal practice and joined the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing as a senior staff counsel. She also continued her counseling work and wrote regularly on her website. In one of her final posts, [a reflection](#) on the opening of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL, in April, she expressed hope that the museum, a commemoration of the victims of lynching in the United States, might help foster the values to which she devoted her life:

“...[I]t is my prayer that the peace and justice that serves as the foundation for the memorial will lead to a legacy where we see the history of slavery as not something to run from but rather a time in this country that must be acknowledged, addressed and healed in order that we can then see the connections between this horrific past and the current dehumanization of descendants of the enslaved in this country. We can then act to rectify this history and become a better America.”

Sheila is survived by her brother, sister-in-law, niece, nephew and countless friends. Services for Sheila Thomas will be held in September and we will post the information on this site. We encourage you to send your personal tributes or photos to us to add to this website to photos@naacpldf.org.