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LDF Media

212-965-2200 / media@naacpldf.org

LDF Mourns the Loss of Joseph “Jazz” Hayden, Former Client and Trailblazing Advocate for Voting Rights of Incarcerated People

The [Legal Defense Fund \(LDF\)](#) is deeply saddened by the passing of Joseph “Jazz” Hayden, a former client of LDF and advocate for voting rights of current and formerly incarcerated people. Hayden’s vision to end felon disenfranchisement in New York City made a reverberating impact throughout the region and nation.

“Mr. Jazz Hayden was an extraordinary activist and brilliant strategist who, in the name of justice, worked to redefine what it means to be an incarcerated citizen in a democracy. Mr. Hayden was among my earliest clients at LDF in *Hayden v. Pataki*, a landmark case against felon disenfranchisement. A legend in Harlem and in the broader community of formerly incarcerated activists, Mr. Hayden helped to jumpstart a powerful movement that led to further felon disenfranchisement litigation, jail-based voting, and prison gerrymandering advocacy work,” said LDF President and Director-Counsel Janai Nelson. “With formidable charisma and a commitment to bettering our world, Mr. Hayden’s steadfast dedication proved that people closest to the problem can point to solutions with unwavering vision. He will be sorely missed, and his ineffaceable legacy remembered for generations to come.”

The lead plaintiff in *Hayden v. Pataki* (2006), a class action lawsuit in which LDF served as counsel, Hayden steered trailblazing advocacy to end voter discrimination against incarcerated people. The lawsuit challenged New York’s felon disenfranchisement law and advocated for formerly and currently incarcerated people to be protected within the Voting Rights Act of 1965, charging that such state laws disproportionately impact Black and Latino communities.

“[The VRA] stopped at the prison walls,” Hayden said in a 2005 interview about the case. “What Congress gave, the states took away... We have unfinished business. We hope to sweep these laws, too, into the dustbin of history along with the poll tax, literacy test, and grandfather clause.”

The lawsuit became the anchor of the Free the Vote campaign, a coalition of several organizations that formed to mount litigation, advocacy, and communications efforts to support the voting rights of those impacted by mass incarceration. Hayden founded Unlock the Block, a New York-based advocacy group that worked in tandem with the Free the Vote campaign to educate and mobilize formerly incarcerated people and their communities, including by helping them register to vote.

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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.