

IN MEMORIAM



Ms. Jean Fairfax, who for twenty years, was widely regarded as one of among the most influential and innovative visionaries on the LDF staff, passed away last week in Phoenix, Arizona. She was 98 years old. Fairfax founded and served as the Director of LDF's Division of Legal Information and Community Services from 1965 to 1984.

Over the course of her 40-year career, Jean Fairfax was a pioneering organizer, a professor, a religious scholar, a missionary, and an unparalleled strategist and policy advocate. She helped organize Black students and families in rural communities in the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, and went on to shape and lead some of the most influential federal government policy innovations to support working class and poor families. She focused her strategic vision on empowering Black families to access quality education for their children, and assisting Black workers in the south in challenging systemic and longstanding employment discrimination. She was the author of groundbreaking reports on the needs of poor families – reports that powerfully influenced aspects of the mid-1960s federal “War on Poverty” and that documented with raw accuracy the nature of white resistance to school integration.



“Jean Fairfax was and remains an absolute legend at LDF,” said LDF President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill (full statement below). “Jean’s guiding principle was her deep and sincere devotion to and respect for poor and working-class families. She listened. She learned about the needs of parents and children and the barriers they faced, and then she fought for policies that would bring to those families the resources they needed to move their lives forward. She was a master strategist. Ms. Fairfax understood how racism worked to de-

press opportunities for Black families, and she was clear-eyed about the need to focus on the system of policies and practices – especially funding policies – that could be transformed to create a level playing field for those most in need... She came to LDF at precisely the moment that President Johnson was launching his “Great Society,” and her steady hand, towering intellect, and relentless advocacy shaped many of its most important programs focused on poor children.”

Jean Fairfax was born in 1920 in Cleveland, Ohio to Dan and Inez Wood Fairfax. Her parents were both the first members of their families to be born legally free in America. Growing up, Fairfax attended public schools in Cleveland, and later graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Michigan. Fairfax then went on to receive her degree in Comparative Religions at the Union Theology Seminary, in a joint degree program with Columbia University.

After college, Fairfax moved south in 1942 to serve as the Dean of Women, first at Kentucky State College and then at Tuskegee University. During that time, Fairfax remained constantly involved in religious work, actively participating in various religious organizations on both campuses and becoming a member of the Student Christian Movement in the South, specifically at the YWCA. It was in these two positions that Fairfax first found her passion for protecting civil rights and education rights.



"It was part of my religious upbringing. I have a deep concern about what happens to the community, that is, I don't separate myself from what happens to my people. That's the connectedness that I learned from my family," said Fairfax in a 2005 article for the National Center for Family Philanthropy.

Fairfax remained in the South for two years and then traveled abroad to do missionary work in Austria following World War II. Upon returning to the United States in 1949, Fairfax moved to New England and continued her work in civil rights and social justice as a Director of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to the colleges and universities in New England.

In 1957, Fairfax moved back to the South, continuing her work with AFSC as the Director of Southern Civil Rights. In 1964, Fairfax traveled to Mississippi to help advise Black families on how to navigate the recently decided *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In Leake County, Mississippi, an incident took place which Fairfax refers to as the most memorable experience in her life. Two weeks before schools opened, the bodies of three slain civil rights workers were found near Fairfax's worksite. The day before the schools opened, white men ran through the county, threatening to call in loans and fire from the sharecropping shanties any Black residents who enrolled their children in the all-white schools. The morning of the schools opening, Fairfax went to the edge of cotton fields with representatives of the Justice Department to assure any African-Americans who were still willing to enter into the newly integrated schools that they would be protected.

"I was aware that trouble, even violence, was anticipated," said Fairfax reflecting on that first day of school in Leake County, Mississippi with the new desegregated school system. "I shall never forget the moment when 6-year-old Deborah Lewis impatiently cried out 'What's everybody waiting for? I'm ready to go.'"

Immediately after escorting Deborah, the sole Black student to integrate the Leake County school, into her new school, Fairfax joined LDF, creating the LDF Division of Legal Information and Community Service, which conducted programs to help Black families transition into new schools.

"I asked her to join LDF for six months; she stayed for two decades," wrote former director-counsel of LDF, Jack Greenberg on Jean Fairfax in his book *Crusaders in the Courts*. "She became the most influential single staff member in determining the direction we took on such issues as integration of Black colleges and which industries we should target in employment cases."



Fairfax moved back to the South, and during those two decades at LDF, played a central role in protecting the decision of *Brown*, and helping Black families adjust to the changes that *Brown* brought about.

"I have very warm and beautiful memories about it. I work with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and Civil Rights. So I spend a lot of time in the South" said Fairfax on her time in the South working for LDF in a 1983 interview with the Southern Oral History Program.

In 1967 Fairfax's work at LDF received a \$300,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. With her team, Fairfax helped Black workers submit complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), submitting over 1,800 charges. During that time, Fairfax met with the leader of the EEOC and son of former president Franklin D. Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. in order to convince him to strengthen EEOC guidelines.

Fairfax helped establish LDF's Washington office in 1969 with Phyllis McClure. Together, the women wrote a report on Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Acts, an essential section of the War on Poverty. The administration used their report to help guide and revise Title I of the Act.

In 1971, Fairfax created a group within LDF in response to fears surrounding the lack of enforcement plans mandated by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in Mississippi. Chaired by Julius Chambers, Henry Marsh, and John Walker, the group aimed to address the issue of integrating higher education. Jean's group advocated for modulated integration, working with coalitions of Black educators to decide the role that LDF would take in addressing these issues.

"Jean Fairfax was sui generis: she was one of a kind, purposeful, focused, formidable, and thoroughly committed to fundamental fairness and simple justice," said Elaine Jones, LDF's fourth President and Director-Counsel. "Equal access to education for African-American children was at the forefront of her advocacy. As a young lawyer at LDF in 1971, Jean urged me to work on the *Adams vs. Richardson* litigation to force the federal government to implement *Brown* in higher educational institutions. I instead chose the areas of criminal justice and the death penalty. Jean did not hold it against me, and she remained one of my she-roses from that time until her



passing. For decades her contributions helped to shape the docket of LDF and contributed to many victories in both the court of public opinion and in the judiciary.”

Fairfax worked on a variety of other projects during and around her time at LDF. She played an essential role in helping to draft the Patient’s Bill of Rights by the American Hospital Association of 1973. She also heavily participated in launching the World Council of Churches’ program in 1948. In addition, Fairfax began to set up multiple organizations and engage in philanthropic pursuits.

“I think it’s very important for a person in their forties and early fifties to think about creating—actually, to do more than think about it, to create—charitable funds and begin to put the money away so it can grow. . .they may not be withdrawing the monies right away, but they still need to start early” said Fairfax.

After 20 years, Fairfax retired from LDF in 1984. However, she continued her work in civil rights, organizing youth programs in civil rights, social justice, peace, and community service in Europe, Mexico, and Israel. She also helped to pave the way for reform of the National School Lunch Program, organizing a group of cross-denomination church women to help advocate for a school lunch program for needy children.

“Jean Fairfax was one of the most extraordinary unsung heroes of the struggle for civil rights,” said Ted Shaw, LDF’s fifth President and Director-Counsel. “Her life story, spanning ninety-eight years, should be told and re-told with those of the greatest heroes who served the cause of racial justice and who served our country. I loved Jean Fairfax, and I am blessed to have known her.”

Fairfax and her sister Betty moved to Arizona in 1986 to teach and participate in numerous philanthropic pursuits. In 1987, the sisters established the Dan and Inez Wood Fairfax Foundation, adopting an 8th grade class at Mary McLeod Bethune School in Phoenix, AZ, and promising each of the 92 graduates college scholarships of \$1,000 a year upon completing high school and attending college.

Fairfax continued to pursue philanthropy and social justice work during the last years of her life. She founded the organization Woman & Philanthropy, served on the board of the Council of Foundations, served as a trustee of the Black Legacy Endowed Fund, served as a Director for the Association of Black Foundation Executives, and helped to endow many charitable funds along with her sister Betty.

Fairfax has received numerous awards including the Lifetime Achievement Award from Radcliffe College, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Conference on Black Philanthropy, the YWCA Tribute to Women award, and the Kent State University President’s Social Responsibility Award.

Fairfax will be deeply missed, but her legacy and work will live on for many generations to come.

As Fairfax said in an interview with the Christian Science Monitor: “[s]omeone had to break the pattern, and very often the civil rights revolution was initiated by the most vulnerable Black persons. Many of them were women and many of them were children — tough, resilient, hopeful, beautiful children. The greatest experience of my life was standing with them as they took the risks.”



Full statement from Sherrilyn Ifill, LDF's current President and Director-Counsel:

Jean Fairfax was and remains an absolute legend at LDF. She commanded the unshakeable respect of a young Derrick Bell during his years litigating desegregation cases in the south when Jean was still working at the American Friends Service Committee, organizing Black rural parents in the south. Jack Greenberg, LDF's second Director-Counsel, hired her to open LDF's Office of Community and Legal Information, which for decades advanced policy initiatives that have become part of the public policy landscape in Washington, D.C. Jean shaped how we think about our government's obligation toward poor children. If you've ever used, as a measure of poverty, the number of children who receive free or reduced fee lunch – then you know the work of Jean Fairfax. That was, in large measure, her innovation.

Jean's guiding principle was her deep and sincere devotion to and respect for poor and working-class families. She listened. She learned about the needs of parents and children and the barriers they faced, and then she fought for policies that would bring to those families the resources they needed to move their lives forward. Jean understood how racism worked to depress opportunities for Black families, and she was clear-eyed about the need to focus on the system of policies and practices – especially funding policies – that could be transformed to create a level playing field for those most in need. She understood the importance of meticulous research and used it to lift up the voices and experiences of marginalized families and communities. But she also understood the workings of our federal government and the agencies that had jurisdiction and authority over federal funds that could be disbursed to support programs that would advance equal opportunity for poor children. Jean came to LDF at precisely the moment that President Johnson was launching his "Great Society," and her steady hand, towering intellect, and relentless advocacy shaped many of its most important programs focused on poor children.

She was an organizer at heart, and her signature work always included reports and analysis that told the story of how racism is really experienced in communities, and the consequences for Black children and families. Her 1972 report, titled "It's Not the Distance, It's the Niggers," – the comment of a white mother who opposed busing in Richmond, Virginia – is an unsparing and necessary study on resistance to busing to achieve school integration.

When Elaine Jones, Ted Shaw and I visited with her in 2016, she was well into her 90s, but still as sharp as ever. It was clear that she was still engaged in a critical examination of poverty and race, and that her commitment was undiminished. We talked for hours. In fact, she grilled me, as the new Director-Counsel, about LDF's work and about our strategy. She and Ted Shaw, with whom she shared a special and close bond of mentorship, reminisced about bold actions they took to address inadequate state funding for public HBCUs. She told us of her travels all around the world as a young woman. And of the painful incidents of racism that she encountered. It astonished and alarmed me then, to realize that there are generations of young advocates who perhaps don't know about the extraordinary life and work of Jean Fairfax. We began plans then to put on a program in D.C. that would lift up and examine her contributions. That program will take place later this year in Washington, D.C.