



Statement on the Passing of Jerome J. Shestack

August 19, 2011



The Lloyd N. Cutler Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Jerome J. Shestack on December 7, 2009.

The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law is deeply saddened by the passing of Jerome J. Shestack, one of the giants of the legal civil rights community. We offer our deepest condolences to his family, including his wife of 60 years Marciarose, his children Jennifer and Jonathan and the rest of his family and many, many friends. Jerry, as he was known across the Lawyers' Committee, will be sorely missed. Throughout his long and storied career he fought tirelessly to protect civil and human rights, and among his many contributions and accomplishments was his pivotal role in the founding of the Lawyers' Committee. He remained deeply engaged for the last 48 years, and in 2009 the Lawyers' Committee recognized him with our highest honor, the Lloyd N. Cutler Lifetime Achievement Award.

On June 15th, 1963, as demands for racial justice were increasingly being met with lawless intimidation and violence, President John F. Kennedy made his historic televised address to the nation on civil rights in which he said "it is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets," adding "those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence." Just four days later, President Kennedy began sending a series of telegrams to prominent attorneys across the country summoning them to a meeting at the White House on June 21st. That meeting led to the founding of the Lawyers' Committee and served to immediately engage the legal community in upholding the rule of law and protecting the rights of African Americans and civil rights activists and supporters. Jerry played a central role in organizing this historic event and, in its aftermath, in formalizing what would become one of the nation's most important public interest legal organizations.

In its first, formative year, Jerry served as the Lawyers' Committee's Executive Director, acted as the primary liaison to the Justice Department and handled the myriad tasks associated with establishing the Lawyers' Committee as a nonprofit organization. His efforts were crucial to maintaining the momentum created by the White House meeting and launching the Lawyers' Committee as a viable organization.

We are profoundly thankful that the Lawyers' Committee continued to benefit from his tireless commitment for nearly five decades. As recently as the last several months he provided guidance on key issues and was very involved in planning for the approaching 50th anniversary of the Lawyers' Committee. His contributions were innumerable and invaluable.

We also honor his many other contributions to the legal community and the struggle for equal justice, including his service as president of the American Bar Association from 1997 to 1998, as United States Ambassador to the United Nations Human Rights Council from 1979 to 1980, and as chairman of both the International League for Human Rights and the American Bar Association's Center for Human Rights.