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November 17, 2008

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Kennedy:

As all of the Director-Counsels who succeeded Thurgood Marshall in leading the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., we write to send you our thoughts and best wishes.

We also welcome this opportunity in this historic year to reflect on your unyielding commitment to civil rights and equality during your five decades of public service. Your Senate career has spanned nine Presidents, twenty-three Congresses, and twenty-four Supreme Court nominations. Throughout this time, you worked to ensure that Congress fulfilled its moral and constitutional obligations to be a formidable partner in the fight for equal justice.

It is remarkable that the sum of our respective years at the helm of LDF corresponds with your singular career in the Senate. Jack Greenberg became Director-Counsel in 1961, after Thurgood Marshall was appointed to the Second Circuit. The very next year, you were elected to the Senate. While we have passed the torch to one another, you have held on to the same light – all the while burning bright – as the preeminent civil rights champion in Congress.

Your Senate career has featured every one of our country's modern civil rights victories. To us, this is no coincidence. After your election in 1962, the Senate began to consider the historic civil rights legislation that forever changed the course of our country. In what would presage a lifetime of commitment to the cause of civil rights, you gave your maiden speech in the Senate in support of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. At the time, you noted the custom that a freshman Senator should be seen and not heard, but concluded that you could not allow the debate to "envelop the emotions and the conscience of the Nation" without speaking. You continued:

It is true, as has been said on this floor, that prejudice exists in the minds and hearts of men. It cannot be eradicated by law. But I firmly believe a sense of fairness and goodwill also exists in the minds and hearts of men. ... This noble characteristic wants to come out. It wants to, and often does, win out against the prejudice. Law, expressing as it does the moral conscience of the community, can help it come out in every person, so in the end the prejudice will be dissolved. ... This is not a political issue. It is a moral issue, to be resolved through political means. ... [T]here comes a point when persuasion must be backed up by law to be effective. In the field of civil rights, that point has been reached.

One year later, your Senate enacted the Voting Rights Act, ensuring political participation for millions of racial minorities who never before had a voice in our democracy. You led efforts by Congress to renew that legislation, which protects the right that is “preservative of all other rights.” Most recently, it was under your leadership that the Senate – in a highly partisan climate – reauthorized the Voting Rights Act, in a 98-0 vote.

Your other contributions to the cause of justice are too voluminous to recite here. You have helped to pave the way for equal opportunity in education, housing and health care. Almost singlehandedly, you have set the standard by which fairness and justice are measured in the judicial confirmation process. By your allies and even your opponents, it is said that your commitment and tenacity know no bounds. When we think of the inspiration you bring to the Senate, we are reminded of your own words in 1980: “The work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die.”

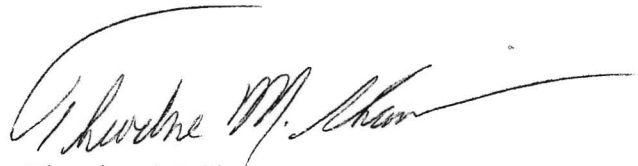
As the respective leaders of LDF, we know something about strength in the face of adversity. It is our opinion that no one fights as hard as you do or with more courage and moral conviction that the right thing must be done. We are eternally indebted to you for opening the doors of opportunity to millions of people.

We hope that your strong spirit and everlasting vigilance are serving you well. Knowing your dedication and commitment, it is our bet that you have continued to conduct the business of the Senate. We are delighted about your return to Washington.

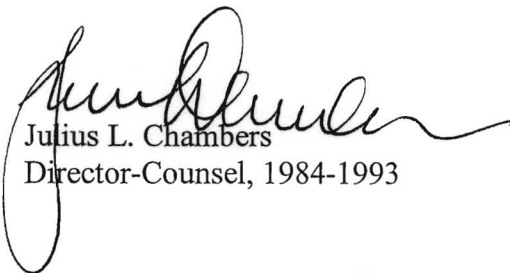
With Best Wishes,



Jack Greenberg
Director-Counsel, 1961-1984



Theodore M. Shaw
Director-Counsel, 2004-2008



Julius L. Chambers
Director-Counsel, 1984-1993



John Payton
Director-Counsel, 2008 to present



Elaine R. Jones
Director-Counsel, 1993 to 2004