

Sherrilyn A. Ifill

Sherrilyn Ifill has served as the President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) since 2013. Under Ifill's leadership, LDF has advanced its legacy as the nation's preeminent racial justice legal organization, leading fights against voter suppression, inequity in education, economic disparities, racial discrimination in the criminal justice system, and more. Last year, Ifill [announced](#) she will step down from her role in the spring of 2022 after nearly a decade leading LDF.

BIOGRAPHY

Ifill was raised in Queens, New York, as the youngest of ten children born to Panamanian immigrants. Ifill's mother, Myrtle, died of cancer when she was five years old. Her father, Lester, was an electrician and social worker. As a result of their relationship, Ifill developed an early interest in being a [civil rights attorney](#): "I wanted to be somebody who makes a difference. I wanted to be powerful. I wanted to exude a certain kind of power that comes from being truthful." She graduated from Vassar College in 1984 with a B.A. in English and earned her J.D. from New York University School of Law in 1987. She has also received honorary doctorates from Bard College, New York University, Fordham Law School, and CUNY Law School.

In addition to her legal work, Ifill is also a frequent public commentator on racial justice issues and has published academic articles and commentaries in leading law journals and newspapers. In 2019, Ifill was inducted into the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. In 2020, she was named one of Glamour Magazine's [Women of the Year](#) as an "unrelenting champion with a stellar reputation among civil rights leaders." Ifill was also named the 2020 [Attorney of the Year](#) by The American Lawyer and received a [2021 Spirit of Excellence Award](#) from the American Bar Association. In 2021, Ifill was appointed to President Biden's Commission on the Supreme Court.

LEGAL EXPERIENCE

Civil rights have been the primary focus of Ifill's career. After graduating from law school, she began her career as a Fellow at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), before joining the staff of the LDF as an Assistant Counsel in 1988. For five years she litigated voting rights cases, including serving as lead counsel in [Houston Lawyers' Association v. Attorney General of Texas](#). This litigation culminated in a landmark Supreme Court decision, holding that judicial elections are covered by Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act.

In 1993, Ifill joined the faculty at University of Maryland School of Law in Baltimore. For more than twenty years, she taught civil procedure and constitutional law and pioneered a series of law clinics, including one of the earliest law clinics in the country focused on challenging legal barriers to the reentry of ex-offenders. Her 2007 book [On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the 21st Century](#), “is credited with laying the foundation for contemporary conversations about lynching and reconciliation.” In a tenth anniversary edition of the book, Bryan Stevenson wrote in the Foreword that Ifill was “a ground-breaking scholar of lynching, memorialization, and America’s failure to adequately confront its past.” During her two decades of teaching, Ifill continued to litigate various complex class action civil rights cases.

In 2013, Ifill returned to LDF to lead the organization as its seventh President and Director-Counsel. She is credited with increasing the visibility and engagement of the organization in litigating cutting edge and urgent civil rights issues and elevating LDF’s leadership fighting voter suppression, inequity in education, and racial discrimination in the criminal justice system.

REPRESENTATIVE CASES

Ifill’s work with LDF has focused on criminal justice, education, and voting rights. LDF has also expanded its economic justice and environmental justice work. A few of LDF’s most significant cases, organized within alphabetized issue areas, are included here:

Criminal Justice

Under Ifill’s leadership, LDF has fought to address discriminatory sentencing practices, jury discrimination, the disproportionate and targeted arrests and convictions of members of communities of color, and other forms of racial bias in our criminal justice system.

Fair Sentencing

In [Ramos v. Louisiana](#), LDF filed an [amicus brief](#) arguing that the Sixth Amendment’s guarantee of a unanimous jury trial applies to the states through the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court ultimately agreed, affirming unanimous juries as a critical protection against injustice in criminal jury trials. In [State v. Robinson](#), LDF asked the North Carolina Supreme Court to grant relief — such as a new sentence or an opportunity to raise claims of racial bias — for criminal defendants whose death sentences were impacted by racial discrimination in jury selection. The court ultimately ruled that several criminal defendants must have their life sentences re-instated, after the state legislature repealed North Carolina’s Racial Justice Act (RJA).

Policing

In [Ferguson v. McDonough](#), Officer McDonough of the Kenosha Police Department tased Joseph Ferguson while he was standing in the street with his hands up, wearing only his boxers. LDF represented Mr. Ferguson in his lawsuit alleg-

ing the use of excessive force and violations of his constitutional rights. In September 2021, the Seventh Circuit allowed Mr. Ferguson's case to proceed and dismissed the officer's appeal and qualified immunity defense. In [Louisville Protesters v. Louisville Metro Police](#), LDF is representing peaceful protesters in their lawsuit against the City of Louisville, Kentucky, for the Louisville Metro Police Department's repeated use of military-style tactics in response to protests. In November 2020, a federal district court denied the defense's motion to dismiss, allowing the case to proceed.

Capital Punishment

In [Rosales v. Quarterman](#), Mariano Rosales spent more than 23 years on Texas's death row after being convicted of capital murder and sentenced to death. LDF presented evidence demonstrating that Black and Latino jurors were intentionally excluded from his jury. Because the Supreme Court has held that purposefully striking minorities from juries violates the Constitution, a federal district court vacated Mr. Rosales conviction and death sentence and he was subsequently resentenced.

Education

During Ifill's tenure at LDF, the school integration work that began with *Brown v. Board of Education* has continued, along with expanded work to address the school-to-prison pipeline.

School Desegregation

LDF has continued to litigate several high-profile decades-long school integration cases. One such case, [Stout v. Jefferson](#), was filed in the wake of Brown in 1965 on behalf of Black schoolchildren in Gardendale, Alabama. In 1971, LDF was successful in obtaining a remedial desegregation plan for the district which remains in effect today. However, in 2014, Gardendale attempted to separate from the Jefferson County School District, which is majority Black, and build a \$51 million high school for its whiter and wealthier population. While a district court initially allowed Gardendale to secede, in 2018 the Eleventh Circuit [reversed](#) this decision, preventing Gardendale from skirting the desegregation plan by creating a new school district.

LDF's work to integrate higher education institutions has also continued rigorously under Ifill's leadership. In 2014, an organization led by anti-affirmative action advocate Edward Blum filed a lawsuit against Harvard, targeting the school's holistic affirmative action policy. LDF represented a coalition of twenty-six Harvard student and alumni organizations of Asian American, Black, Latinx, Native American, and white students who oppose Blum's lawsuit and want holistic consideration of race in admissions to continue. In 2019, Massachusetts's federal district court [affirmed](#) Harvard's consideration of race as consistent with decades of Supreme Court precedent.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Since Ifill's arrival in 2013, LDF has greatly expanded its work to address the

school-to-prison pipeline, the system of policies that push students of color out of school and into the criminal justice system. In 2013, LDF filed a historic [consent decree](#) in Meridian, Mississippi, that addressed harsh and racially discriminatory discipline policies that targeted Black students. In Meridian, police had been arresting and incarcerating Black students for minor rule violations such as dress code infractions, lateness, or leaving class to use the restroom without permission. The consent decree made sweeping policy changes that changed discipline policy, kept police out of schools, and implemented proven alternatives to suspension and expulsion like restorative practices.

In another example, in May 2020, LDF filed a lawsuit against the Barbers Hill Independent School District, located in Texas, for enforcing a dress code that discriminated on the basis of race and sex and suspending De'Andre Arnold and K.B., two Black students, because they would not cut their locs. In August 2020, the district court in Texas found that the policy was discriminatory and [granted](#) a preliminary injunction that allowed K.B. to return to school without cutting his locs.

Voting Rights

Ifill's leadership at LDF began as the Supreme Court struck down election law preclearance requirements from the 1965 Voting Rights Act in *Shelby County v. Holder*. As a result, during Ifill's tenure LDF has filed many lawsuits challenging efforts to disenfranchise or otherwise make it more difficult for Black Americans and other citizens to vote.

Access to the Ballot

In [NAACP v. USPS](#), LDF sued the United States Postal Service (USPS) for delivery delays and inadequate measures to ensure timely delivery of mail-in ballots for the November 2020 election. The lawsuit culminated in USPS implementing court-ordered "extraordinary measures" for the timely delivery of ballots. The parties reached a [settlement](#), under which the USPS agreed to meet with the NAACP in the months before each national primary and general election through 2028 and to provide weekly reports on service performance during the six weeks leading up to general elections. In [Allen v. Waller County](#), LDF sued Waller County, Texas, on behalf of students at Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU) who alleged the county's early voting schedule for the November 2018 election unconstitutionally limited their access to early voting. The case is still ongoing.

Voter ID Laws

In [United States v. Texas / Veasey v. Perry](#), LDF challenged Texas's restrictive photo voter ID laws, which left thousands of Black and Latino voters without access to the democratic process. A federal district court found the law was unconstitutional because it was enacted with the intent to discriminate against racial minorities in violation of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. However, the Fifth Circuit reversed, finding the law "sufficiently remed[ied] discrimination against Black and Latino voters." In [Greater Birmingham Ministries v. Alabama](#), LDF challenged Alabama's restric-

tive photo voter ID law, arguing the legislature intentionally passed the law to discriminate against and burden Black and Latino voters. The Eleventh Circuit held that there was insufficient evidence to show that the legislature was motivated by racial discrimination or that the law had a discriminatory impact.

Redistricting

In [*Milligan v. Merrill*](#) and [*Thomas v. Merrill*](#), LDF is currently challenging Alabama's newly drawn political maps. The suits charge that the new map denies Black residents their equal opportunity to participate in the political process and elect candidates of choice, and that both the congressional and state legislative maps result from racial gerrymanders that intentionally pack and crack Black communities in the state. In January 2022, a federal district [enjoined](#) the map and ordered the legislature to draw a new map with two Black-majority districts.