



Strengthening Public Defenders.
Transforming Public Defense.

John Lewis Loved Public Defenders

John Lewis was among America's most tireless advocates for civil and human rights. He has been an inspiration for a nation. Congressman Lewis was also a vocal supporter for public defenders, who he saw as integral to that struggle. In that role, he has been an inspiration for the thousands of women and men fighting along-side marginalized communities to resist injustice in the nation's criminal legal system. He understood that the criminal legal system is the latest manifestation of an ongoing effort to oppress people of color in this country. He knew public defenders were first responders in that fight. **John Lewis loved public defenders. And, we loved John Lewis.**

In 2004 Illy, Rap, and 4-month-old Aaliyah moved to Atlanta to help establish Georgia's first, state-wide public defender system. Even before this transition, they saw Congressman John Lewis as an icon. They admired his tireless, lifelong fight for civil and human rights. They knew all about his heroic work as a young activist. They knew all about his steadfast determination in the political arena. However, at the time Illy and Rap did not know that Congressman Lewis saw public defenders as critical to this ongoing struggle. They came to learn that he loved and admired these advocates.

It was not until Rap began working on public defense reform in the South that he and Illy first realized the enormity of the task at hand. As they became more familiar with public defense in Georgia and Louisiana and Alabama and Mississippi, they came to understand that the fight facing public defenders in these places was of an entirely different magnitude than those in Rap's experiences at the public defender office in Washington, DC. The hostility towards relentless advocacy for marginalized communities was palpable. Dehumanized bodies were routinely processed through the system like widgets. There was little patience for efforts to slow down the process or to seek individualized justice. People were reduced to case files to be efficiently dealt with and forgotten. In many of these courtrooms, defenders were expected to obediently facilitate the assembly line. Lawyering was often reduced to a ministerial task; applying lubricant to machinery that was always pressing to move more quickly.

Illy and Rap left D.C. believing public defense work was civil and human rights work. Their experience in the South made them realize it was the front line of this critical battle.

Gideon's Promise was founded to forge a movement of public defenders to support one another as we collectively resisted the status quo. While there were dedicated defenders fighting for justice in courthouses across the South, there was no public defender community bound by a shared vision and commitment to push for transformative change. Individually, a dedicated defender could eke out justice from time to time in individual cases. Collectively, defenders could transform the way the system understood what justice looked like and how vulnerable people deserved to be treated. Gideon's Promise was founded to build and support that community.



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Undoubtedly, the task at hand was daunting. Passionate young public defenders routinely had the spirit beaten out of them early in their tenure. **We knew we needed to keep them inspired. That inspiration came in the form of Congressman John Lewis.**

When Illy and Rap first met Congressman Lewis, he could not have been more gracious. At the time, the organization worked exclusively with public defenders in the Deep South. As Illy and Rap began to explain to Congressman Lewis how these public defenders were part of the work he devoted his life to, they learned he needed no explanation. He was already convinced that public defenders were carrying on the necessary work of their civil rights ancestors. He knew the criminal legal arena was one of the starkest examples of the unfinished business of the struggle for civil rights. He appreciated that public defenders were at the heart of this ongoing effort. He recognized that, just as was the case fifty years earlier, the South was the front line of this battle. He knew this work could not be shouldered by any lone individual – that it would take the support of a community to sustain the soldiers in this struggle.

Congressman Lewis understood how important our work was and asked how he could help. Illy and Rap asked if he would speak to our community and reinforce the idea that our work is a necessary extension of the ongoing struggle for civil and human rights. He did not hesitate. That summer he spoke at our annual gala in Washington DC. We were still called The Southern Public Defender Training Center (SPDTC). It would be two years before we would change our name to Gideon's Promise. **Congressman Lewis was literally with Gideon's Promise since before there was a Gideon's Promise.**

Congressman Lewis remained a friend and supporter for years to come. When Illy and Rap would see him in the streets of Atlanta, he would always ask about the public defenders and ask us to thank them for him.

So, in 2017, when Gideon's Promise decided to create a Lifetime Achievement Award, it seemed natural to name it after Congressman Lewis. We understood that asking a person – especially a person as renowned as Congressman Lewis – to attach their name to such a recognition was a big ask. We asked if he would honor us by agreeing to allow us to name this award after him. He responded as though he was the one being honored. Without hesitation, he explained how much he admired public defenders and accepted our invitation. We asked if he would agree to say a few words when we announced the award at a ceremony at the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. Again, he could not have been more gracious.

The evening of the ceremony, Congressman Lewis was arriving from his work in Washington, DC. He immediately came from the airport to the event. He arrived as the program started. He shared words with a packed room. He stayed until the last group of people left that night, signing programs and thanking the many public defenders in attendance. **Congressman Lewis loved public defenders.**

Another time, roughly a year later, when hundreds of our public defenders gathered at a hotel /conference center by the Atlanta Airport for our semi-annual gathering. Congressman Lewis arrived for a separate engagement with Senator Corey Booker. A group of public defenders from Louisiana saw him and introduced themselves. Once again, gracious as always, Congressman Lewis stopped to talk. He thanked



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the defenders for their work. He took pictures with them. Whatever business he had could wait. Congressman Lewis found the time to make sure these public defenders knew he thought they were important. **Congressman Lewis loved public defenders.**

Last fall, Illy ran into Congressman Lewis in the neighborhood where we live. They stopped to talk. She thanked him again for all the support he has given public defender over the years.

As they wrapped up their conversation, Congressman Lewis offered some parting words: **“Thank you Gideon’s Promise, keep up the good work. Thank you public defenders.”**

Since Congressman Lewis was first introduced to Gideon’s Promise, our community has expanded to over half the states in the country. Defenders from California to Pennsylvania, facing the same challenges as those in Georgia and Louisiana, are now part of this community. Many of our partner offices have forged strong, client-centered teams that support one another. **However, many of our lawyers continue to work in relative isolation. They face resistance. They come home each night carrying the trauma of those they fight for. It can be hard to carry on. John Lewis’ example propels these lawyers.**

Congressman Lewis said, “To truly revolutionize our society we must first revolutionize ourselves. We must be the change we seek if we are to effectively demand transformation from others.” As our public defenders continue to revolutionize themselves so they can be the transformational change so desperately needed, Congressman Lewis memory will continue to inspire us.

We love Congressman Lewis. We are grateful that Congressman Lewis loved public defenders.

With Immense Appreciation,

The Gideon’s Promise Family