

OPINION

121 former Conyers staffers: May Conyers' commitment to democracy, civil rights live on

121 former staffers of U.S. Rep. John Conyers Published 9:32 a.m. ET Nov. 4, 2019 | Updated 11:21 a.m. ET Nov. 4, 2019

We represent a diverse group of professionals, ranging from public servants to legal and foreign policy experts to political and public affairs strategists. The tie that binds us is our collective good fortune to have served Congressman John Conyers, Jr. at pivotal moments in our respective careers. Through our work, we were privileged to have front-row seats to history.

As we mourn his death — along with citizens across Detroit, the U.S. and around the globe — we find ourselves reflecting on his tenure as the longest-serving black member of the United States Congress. Essential to understanding his legacy is recognition of the simple, yet profound principles which guided his life as a dedicated public servant: jobs, justice and peace. Congressman Conyers had an extraordinary impact on a wide range of issues directly affecting the lives of Americans — especially their civil rights.

More: [U.S. Rep. John Conyers, civil rights icon and former dean of Congress, dies at 90 \(/story/news/politics/2019/10/27/u-s-rep-john-conyers-dean-congress-dies-amid-sexual-harassment-scandal/909300001/\)](#)

U.S. Rep. Jon Conyers' funeral: [Political, religious, sports, entertainment leaders to pay tribute \(/story/news/politics/2019/11/01/john-conyers-funeral-bill-clinton/4126211002/\)](#)

The people of Michigan's 13th Congressional District proudly elected Congressman Conyers 25 times to represent them in Congress and, in turn, he leveraged the power of his seat to uplift communities in Detroit, across the country and throughout the world. His Michigan roots shaped his belief that people can “disagree without being disagreeable” and his desire to lead with civility.

Following the Detroit riots and assassination of his friend, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Congressman Conyers pledged to prioritize full equality for the people of southeast Michigan and the entire nation — and that mission became an integral part of his life's work. Joining him in the fight for full equality was civil rights leader Rosa Parks, who served in his Detroit office for over two decades and became the first African American civilian woman to “lie in honor” in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda as a result of Congressman Conyers' efforts.

Congressman Conyers left an indelible mark on our nation's history. He helped create the Congressional Black Caucus; authored legislation designating Martin Luther King's birthday as a federal holiday; led the defense of President Bill Clinton during House impeachment proceedings; oversaw Democratic amendments to post 9/11 legislation to ensure protection of civil liberties; sponsored legislation to encourage our nation to address the abhorrent legacy of slavery; sought justice for black farmers; and designated jazz music as a national treasure.

Most notably, he helped to safeguard the crown jewel of our democracy — the right to vote.

As one of his first acts as a member of Congress, he played an active role in crafting the 1965 Voting Rights Act and he also helped enact the National Voter Registration Act, a bill that facilitated voter registration for millions of Americans.

He was a defender of civil rights, women's rights and immigrants. His role as a member, and ultimately the first African American chairman, of both the House Oversight and the House Judiciary Committees, were undoubtedly among the highlights in his storied career. It was through the distinguished position as Judiciary Chairman that he spearheaded enactment of landmark legislation on hate crimes, police misconduct, civil liberties and criminal justice, including the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, and led the fights to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act multiple times.

A genuine patriot, who served honorably during the Korean War, Congressman Conyers cared deeply about America and all of its citizens. He believed everyone deserved a fair shot at experiencing the land of liberty and opportunity. He championed progressive policy issues that were, in many ways, ahead of his time. When phrases such as “Medicare for All,” “reparations” and “Out of Iraq and Afghanistan” were hardly spoken in Democratic circles, Congressman Conyers was leading the charge on these very causes. Today, they are the subject of serious discussion in presidential debates and the national discourse.

What made working for Congressman Conyers such an extraordinary experience was his constant encouragement to improve the quality of life not only for all Americans, but also citizens around the globe. This was best illustrated through his tireless advocacy on behalf of the people of Haiti, as well as the citizens of South Africa during the fight against apartheid.

Although our democracy lost a giant, we take solace in knowing that Congressman Conyers' legacy will live on through the landmark legislation he enacted, the policy debates he inspired and the subsequent generations he mentored who will continue to carry the torch for justice. His legacy perseveres each time an American citizen casts a ballot to vote.

As we approach the 2020 elections and beyond, we honor his legacy by preserving and protecting voting rights and being engaged citizens at every level of government. May his commitment to democracy and civil rights live on in all of us.

This guest column is signed by 121 former staffers of the late U.S. Rep. John Conyers. They each worked for the congressman at some point between 1972 to 2017. The signers are: Aaron Hiller, Alec French, Alexia Smokler, Algene T. Sajery, Ammar Moussa, Andrea Culebras Drumm, Andres Jimenez, Andrew Schreiber, Angelique Dieguez, Anita L. Johnson, Arif Haque, Benjamin Staub, Bennie Barnes-Williams, Betty Petrenz, Blake Chisam, Bobby Vassar, Brandon Johns, Brian Woolfolk, Carl Levan, Carol Chodroff, Carolou Goodridge McAnuff, Carolyn Donnelly, Catrell Brown, Cedric R. Hendricks, Christal Sheppard, Dan Riffle, Daniel Aaron Hervig, Danielle J. Brown, David Lachmann, Davonne Darby, Demelza Baer, Dena Graziano, Diana Oo, Dwight Sullivan, Elisabeth Stein, Elizabeth Kendall, Elliot Mincberg, Eric Garduno, Eric Tamarkin, Erica Morris Long, Erik Sperling, Erika West, Fawzieh Ameen, George Slover, Greg Barnes, Greg Moore, Jalen Craig, James Park, Janis D. Hazel, Jared Hautamaki, Jason Everett, Jesselyn McCurdy, JoAnn Watson, Joe Graupensperger, Joel Segal, John Matlock, Jonathan Cuneo, Jonathan Godfrey, Jonathan Yarowsky, Joseph Cirincione, Joseph Ehrenkrantz, Julia Massimino, Justin Talbot Zorn, Kanya Bennett, Katie Gorno, Keenan Keller, Kimberly Hill Knott, Kristin Wells, Kriston Alford McIntosh, LaDedra Drummond, Larry Arreguin, LaShawn Y. Warren, Liliana Coronado, Lillian German, Lisa Carr, Mark B. Watson, Martina Hone, Matthew Thome, Mauri DeWaun Gray, Melanie Roussell-Newman, Michael Darner, Michelle Busuito, Michelle Millben, Michelle Persaud, Michone T. Johnson, Monalisa Dugue, Monique Mansfield, Nelson Saunders, Nhasyria Payton, Nicole Triplett, Nolan Rappaport, Norberto Salinas, Perry Apelbaum, Raymond Plowden, Renata Strause, Rinia Shelby-Crooms, Robert S. Weiner, Rodney Walker, Ron LeGrand, Rosalind Jackson, Sam Sokol, Samara Foxx, Sampak Garg, Scott Deutchman, Shadawn Reddick-Smith, Sherille Ismail, Stacey Dansky, Stephanie Baez, Stephanie J. Peters, Stephanie Moore, Sunceria Garrett, Ted Kalo, Teresa Vest, Tom Jawetz, Veronica Eligan, Virgie M. Rollins, William Kirk, Jr., Wilsar F. Jonson, Yolanda Lipsey, Yvesner H. Zamar, Zoe Cadore.

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