

Remembering Clarence B. Jones

John Reynolds, SCLC/SCOPE. July 2026.

Clarence B. Jones, a confidant, lawyer and speechwriter for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, who helped plan the March on Washington and drafted part of Dr. King's celebrated "I Have a Dream" speech, died on May 22 in Cupertino, Calif. He was 95.

A brilliant organizer and a member of Dr. King's inner circle, Mr. Jones planned protest campaigns; raised funds for Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and coordinated legal strategies to challenge discriminatory laws, defend arrested demonstrators and fight lawsuits against their leaders. He was one of the lawyers who represented four Black ministers in a seminal case of libel law, *New York Times v. Sullivan*, in which the United States Supreme Court held that a public official could not win damages for criticism of his official performance without proving that published statements were made with deliberate malice. It was a landmark victory for the constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press, and cleared the way for reporting on widespread disorder and civil rights infringements in the South without fear of libel actions.



Clarence Jones behind Dr. King

It was also a clarifying victory for civil rights leaders. "We regarded the suit as an effort to politically discredit the leadership of the direct action civil rights movement of Dr. King," Mr. Jones told law students at the University of San Francisco in 2012. "The political objective of the lawsuit was to bankrupt and decapitate the civil rights leadership."

Mr. Jones was often an unseen hand behind historic events. In 1963, he helped plan demonstrations in racially segregated Birmingham, Ala., that exposed to a shocked nation the brutality of authorities who turned high-pressure fire hoses and snarling dogs on hundreds of children and adult protesters, many of whom, including Dr. King, were hauled off to overflowing city jails. Later, when Dr. King wrote his classic statement on racism, the "Letter From Birmingham Jail," it was Mr. Jones who smuggled it out — a "manuscript" scribbled

first on scraps of paper and in the margins of newspapers, and later on Mr. Jones's notepads. The bits and pieces were assembled and edited for publication by the Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker.

That summer, Dr. King, Mr. Jones and others — including Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, John Lewis and the political strategist Stanley Levison — met often at Mr. Jones's apartment in the Riverdale neighborhood of the Bronx to plan the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and discuss ideas for the speech Dr. King would deliver at the Lincoln Memorial. There were several versions, written at different times, of what became the "I Have a Dream" speech. Dr. King wrote a final draft with Mr. Jones and Mr. Levison. They called it "Normalcy — Never Again." There was no reference to a dream and little of the stirring rhetoric for which Dr. King is remembered. "The logistical preparations for the march were so burdensome that the speech was not a priority for us," Mr. Jones recalled in a memoir, "Behind the Dream: The Making of the Speech That Transformed a Nation" (2011, with Stuart Connelly).

On Aug. 28, 1963, 250,000 people crowded onto the National Mall. The day was a show of support for civil rights legislation proposed by President John F. Kennedy, and the speakers had agreed to avoid incendiary remarks that might derail it. Dr. King's speech began quietly, with an analogy about America defaulting on a promissory note to its minority citizens, and Mr. Jones, standing nearby, recognized it as one of his contributions. Then, partway into the speech, the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson shouted, "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin." Dr. King paused. "Martin clutched the speaker's lectern and seemed to reset," Mr. Jones recalled. Then Dr. King put his text aside, dropped his assessment of current injustices and launched into a soaring, improvised peroration on his vision of America as a land of freedom and equality rising from slavery and hatreds. "I have a dream," he declared, "that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.'" "I have a dream," he continued, "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today." Mr. Jones later obtained, and signed over to Dr. King, the registered copyright for one of the most heralded speeches of the century.

In recent years, Mr. Jones had lectured widely, taught at the University of San Francisco and was a resident scholar at Stanford University in Palo Alto. In 2018, Mr. Jones and Jonathan D. Greenberg co-founded the Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice at the University of San Francisco to foster the teachings of Dr. King and Mohandas K. Gandhi. In 2024, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, by President Joseph R. Biden Jr.



In an interview with The Free Press that year, Mr. Jones recalled telling Dr. King about what made him a talented speechwriter. "I hear your voice in my head," Mr. Jones said. "I hear your voice in perfect pitch."