



Sargent Shriver (right) with his wife, Eunice Shriver and NEJL founder Earl Johnson, Jr. in 1998 at the reunion for Reginald Heber Smith Fellowship alumni.

Remembering Sargent Shriver

Seldom, if ever, has an endeavor been more appropriately named than ours. It is not just that equal justice for the poor was dear to Sargent Shriver's heart or that he recognized government had an obligation to provide the counsel essential to that goal. It is safe to say that without Sarge we would never have had a federally funded program of legal services for the poor.

I was fortunate enough to hear the story of the Legal Services Program's birth from Sarge's own mouth in 2002. The National Equal Justice Library held an event that included the presentation of an award to Edgar Cahn for the Yale Law Journal article he and his late wife, Jean Cahn, had authored in the mid-1960s. Sarge was there to present the award. He told how someone had slipped him a copy of the not-yet-published manuscript of the article that argued lawyers had a role in the War on Poverty. Sarge described how he stayed up half the night reading the article, managed to get the Cahns' home telephone number, woke them up at 2 AM and told them to be in his office at 8 AM the next morning. By the end of that next day, Edgar was Sarge's speech writer and Jean was a consultant charged with the mission of creating a legal services program as part of the War on Poverty.

Many people helped shape what became the OEO Legal Services Program and others helped create the Legal Services Corporation that took over when the War on Poverty ended. But without Sargent Shriver and his overnight decision, it is unlikely the federal government would have ever begun funding legal services for the poor. In fact, the drafters of the "War on Poverty" legislation had rejected a proposal to include legal aid as one of the services to be provided the poor with OEO funding. Sarge simply ignored that and made legal services part of the Community Action Program.

I had the honor and pleasure of working under Sarge for over two years, while directing the OEO Legal Services Program and as a member of his senior staff. I had many opportunities to experience his unwavering commitment to the program and the lawyers it funded and the clients they represented—including those occasions when controversies arose or there was political opposition that might have unsettled a lesser leader.

Sargent Shriver was the most inspirational person I have ever known. Not just his public speeches, which were dynamic enough to stir an amoeba into action, but in private conversation and at staff meetings as well. You always left with a feeling you should do better--and could. He also was the most consistently optimistic. Problems were opportunities for solution, not obstacles to be avoided. Yet, for all his intensity and commitment, Sarge also had a great sense of humor and never took himself too seriously.

With Sargent Shriver's death, America's poor lost a great champion, our country lost a great public servant, while government-funded legal services lost its creator and all of legal aid lost an inspiring leader.

As part of this program that bears Sarge's name, the most important thing we can do to honor his memory is to make sure these pilot projects and their evaluation advance the goal of equal justice for all he worked so hard to achieve.

-Earl Johnson, Jr.