

JUSTICE TAKES A FIGHT

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Photo by Vlad Archin

the Center for Constitutional Rights will amplify the impact of the transformative social justice being done by movements, activists, and community leaders across the South.

The Center for Constitutional Rights has deep roots in the South. We were founded by lawyers working together with Black civil rights movement activists in the 1960s, and we had an office in Greenville, Mississippi, in the 1980s and 1990s that eventually closed. Now, thanks to your generous partnership and in response to the needs of our movement allies in the region, we are reopening the Center for Constitutional Rights Southern Regional Office, the centerpiece of **Southern Justice Rising**.

Like all of our work, **Southern Justice Rising** is part of a vital movement ecosystem. Our partners in the South have told us that they need our skills there. In order to challenge the modern-day legacies of slavery in the South, we must live and work there; we must be local to be relevant. From our new regional hub in Jackson, Mississippi, we will bring the Center for Constitutional Rights' full institutional

Welcome to the Center for Constitutional Rights' Spring 2022 newsletter. In this season of vibrant new growth, I am excited to share with you, our steadfast supporters, the latest updates on **Southern Justice Rising**, a new bold initiative in which

commitment and resolve and re-establish our presence in the epicenter of white supremacy.

At the center of our work in the South is the fight against environmental racism. Since 2017, we have been providing legal and advocacy support to Black-led community organizations and activists in Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," where Black and Indigenous communities have experienced a long and painful history of bearing the health burdens of the petrochemical industry. We have undertaken an array of work to uplift the organizations and activists leading the struggle for environmental justice in these communities which we are excited to share in this newsletter.

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Justice takes a fight. It is our honor and privilege that social movements and organizations on the ground trust us enough to realize their vision and that you, our valued supporters, make it possible.

Thanks to you, we are able to make bold moves to back visionary leaders on the frontlines of the fight for justice in the South. Thank you for being part of the Center for Constitutional Rights family!

In Gratitude and Solidarity,

Vince Warren
Executive Director

ON THE FRONTLINES OF JUSTICE

The Center for Constitutional Rights' history of litigation and advocacy in the South is long, going back to our founding lawyers' work in partnership with Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and other organizers of the civil rights movement. We have challenged injustice in the South for decades, defending voting rights activists, combating racist police and hate groups, advocating for people incarcerated in notoriously dangerous prisons, and demanding social and economic justice. In honor of Earth Day and our new **Southern Justice Rising** initiative, this newsletter spotlights our latest work in the fight against environmental racism in the South. You will hear from some extraordinary members of the Center for Constitutional Rights family who are fearlessly challenging environmental injustice every day, and supporters like you without whom we simply cannot continue this important work.

Thank you for advancing our critical efforts in the South, around the country, and globally!

OUR DONORS



“There is great need for the Center for Constitutional Right’s movement lawyering in the South as important gains for marginalized communities - in voting rights, women’s rights, gender equality - are in constant threat. We look forward to supporting CCR’s continuing work in the American South as the Southern Justice Rising initiative progresses.” – Rita and Bill Bender

RITA AND BILL BENDER have supported the Center for Constitutional Rights from its inception. Rita first knew our founders when she was a field worker for the Council of Federated Organizations in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement in 1964, when she had the opportunity to see first-hand, the unwavering commitment to supporting the freedom struggle.

Rita and Bill met at Rutgers Law School in 1965. They were Law Student Civil Rights Research Counsel interns at the law office of CCR founders Arthur Kinoy and William Kunstler, followed by two years of clerking for Morton Stavis, another founder. After law school, Bill served as one of the first CCR staff counsel, followed by five years of teaching at the Rutgers

Law School Constitutional Law Clinic. Bill handled several CCR cases working with Rutgers law students, Professor Kinoy and other clinic faculty. Rita taught in the Rutgers Urban Legal Clinic, the first clinic program in the Country to focus on issues of poverty.

After moving to Seattle in 1975, Bill was a federal public defender and Rita worked in the King County Defender program. Rita then became the Regional Director for the Federal Legal Services program, supervising and providing training for legal services offices in the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Hawaii, and Micronesia. In 1990, their careers converged again at their current law firm which has a longtime, strong pro bono practice, furthering their pursuit of equal justice.

In 2010, Bill and Rita served as visiting faculty at the University of Mississippi Law School under a grant provided by the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation and the Kellogg Foundation. Their focus was the deliberate denial of education for Black children in Mississippi. Their research at the University and in the years that followed has supported litigation in the Federal Court in Mississippi, seeking to reestablish the guarantees provided after the Civil War of education for the Freeman – guarantees which have been systematically and deliberately denied.

Introducing many colleagues and friends to the Center for Constitutional Rights over the years, Bill and Rita are thrilled to share their excitement for **Southern Justice Rising** and the full return of our high-impact litigation, advocacy and cultural work to the urgent and consequential battles our southern partners are facing.

ON THE FRONTLINES OF JUSTICE

OUR BOARD



“My work in climate has taught me that the environmental justice issues that so many Black people, especially Black women, have been screaming about for generations are at the root of what caused that storm in 2005.”

– Colette Pichon Battle, Center for Constitutional Rights Board member, referring to Hurricane Katrina.

COLETTE PICHON BATTLE wants climate justice in the Gulf South. As Executive Director of the Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy (GCCLP), a regional organization working with frontline communities in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Puerto Rico, Colette was a lead coordinator for Gulf South Rising 2015, the first regional initiative around climate justice and just transition in the South. In addition to developing advocacy initiatives that intersect with race, systems of power, and ecology, Colette directs GCCLP’s legal services in immigration and disaster law.

In 2015 Colette was selected as an Echoing Green Climate Fellow, in 2016 she was named a White House Champion of Change for Climate Equity, and in 2018 Kenyon College awarded her an Honorary Doctorate. In 2019, Colette was selected as an Obama Fellow for her work with Black and Indigenous communities in the South and she gave a TED Talk, “Climate change will displace millions. Here’s how we prepare.” In 2021, Colette was appointed a Margaret Burroughs Community Fellow. Colette also co-founded and led the Red, Black & Green New Deal, the national climate initiative for the Movement for Black Lives.

In addition to her service on the Center for Constitutional Rights Board, Colette serves on the boards of the US Climate Action Network and the Highlander Research and Education Center, advises the Kataly Foundation’s Environmental Justice Resourcing Collective, and chairs the Equity Advisory Group of the Louisiana Governor’s Climate Initiative Task Force.

Colette brings firsthand knowledge of the impacts of climate change on southern communities and a broad perspective of how ecological inequities and the climate crisis are impacting the world. “The harm you understand in Cancer Alley is what you should understand in Nigeria, Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, Vietnam, all these communities. They are suffering the same fate. And it’s the economic system based on the ‘take, take, take,’ attitude.”

This knowledge fuels Colette’s fight for climate justice and equitable disaster recovery. **“If you don’t acknowledge the harm then you can never fully repair the harm,”** she said during the Center for Constitutional Rights’ Black History Month panel “For the Love of Rage: The Power of Rage in Pursuit of Black Liberation.”

ON THE FRONTLINES OF JUSTICE

OUR STAFF



PAM SPEES is fighting for environmental justice in her home state of Louisiana. Senior Staff Attorney Pam Spees is a dedicated movement lawyer with a background in international criminal and human rights law.

She has sought accountability for the crimes against humanity of sexual violence committed by Catholic clergy ([SNAP v. Vatican](#)) and for the harms done to Iraqi civil society groups and Iraq War veterans ([the Right to Heal initiative](#)), among many other powerful cases and projects.

These days, she is on the frontlines of the battles for social change in Louisiana. Pam's tremendous work on the [No Bayou Bridge Pipeline Project](#) is challenging repressive legislation that heightens the risk and criminal penalties for those protesting pipelines. With [The Descendants Project](#) and others, she is advancing change at the intersection of dissent and protest, and the very real stakes that such protests seek to highlight: health, environmental justice, racial justice, and a habitable planet.

"In the fights in [Louisiana's] Cancer Alley in historically Black communities under siege, every social justice issue is present," Pam has said. Pam is hopeful and inspired by the Center for Constitutional Rights' southern partners.

"The real honor in all this is working with folks who've stood against the injustices for such a long time, who are now envisioning the great turning. It's a powerful moment."

Justice takes a fight. Thanks to you, **Southern Justice Rising's** moment is now!

Prior to joining the Center for Constitutional Rights, Pam practiced criminal law in Louisiana and also served as Program Director of the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice in the establishment of the International Criminal Court. She is a graduate of the CUNY School of Law.



EMILY C. R. EARLY joined the Center for Constitutional Rights in February as Associate Director of our new Southern Regional Office – the cornerstone of **Southern Justice Rising!**

Together with our fierce, unapologetic team of activists, lawyers and storytellers, Emily will expand the reach and impact of the Center for Constitutional Rights and our allies and partners throughout the region to amplify their demands and achieve their vision of flourishing communities.

"I am beyond elated and deeply humbled to embark on this monumental stage in the Center for Constitutional Rights' return to its roots in the Deep South. I have long admired the organization's relentless, holistic, and fearless efforts to build power in Black and Brown communities and the committed, radical donors who make it possible. I look forward to realizing our transformative vision in support of local and regional allies," Emily said.

A distinguished and formidable litigator, Emily was previously Senior Supervising Attorney of the Economic Justice Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center. She is a graduate of Howard University School of Law and currently serves on the inaugural Community Engagement Board of the Women's Resource Center to End Domestic Violence in Decatur, Georgia.

Emily brings deep commitment to realizing Black, Southern-led solutions to the social justice challenges communities in the South are facing. She resides in the Atlanta metro area with her husband, Del, and three sons.

ON THE FRONTLINES OF JUSTICE

OUR PARTNERS



JO BANNER is a co-founder of [The Descendants Project](#), an organization advocating for descendants of people once enslaved in Louisiana's river parishes.

Jo and her sister Joy grew up in Wallace, Louisiana, a small town that has been hit hard by the harms

of environmental racism. It's at the heart of an area known as "Cancer Alley" because of the toxic pollution that has had devastating effects on the community's health.

When the Banners were kids, a large tract of rural land in the area was rezoned for industrial use. "I remember my parents telling us that we were going to have to move. They were told there was nothing they could do and the parish was taking our land. We didn't think we had a choice," Jo said.

The council president who pushed through the zoning ordinance was later sentenced to prison for engaging in money laundering, extortion, and threats of expropriation to residents as he tried to help a foreign corporation build a factory next to Wallace. That factory was never built, but the illegal zoning ordinance remained. Now a company is looking to place a grain terminal on the same spot, which would bring more harmful pollution to the area. Adding profoundly to the harm, the industrial development would be sited on land believed to hold the unmarked graves of African people once enslaved on nearby plantations.

"This is a miscarriage of justice that is still causing us tremendous trauma, and it needs to be corrected. We need peace," Jo said.

The Banners own and operate a café that sells goods made from the recipes of their ancestors. They share the Afro-Creole history of the region through the lens of their family oral histories.

ABOUT THE CASE

In [The Descendants Project v. St. John the Baptist Parish](#), we are suing to seek justice, health, and safety for Louisiana communities that are surrounded by petrochemicals – land that was once covered by plantations. We are asking the court to nullify an illegally pushed-through industrial zoning ordinance and remove it from all maps and documents. "The Descendants Project is reaching back into the past to right wrongs that have been done to the people of Wallace and prevent the harm that lurks over them once again," said Center for Constitutional Rights Senior Staff Attorney Pamela Spees. Our work with The Descendants Project is happening alongside our related work resisting a plastics facility with Rise St. James; the [No Bayou Bridge Pipeline Project](#); and several other cases and projects.

Because of you, the Center for Constitutional Rights is fighting harder for southern social justice movements!

THE MICHAEL RATNER CAMPAIGN FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Double the Impact of Your Gift

Thanks to a **generous match from Katherine Franke**, you can double the impact of your commitment. Michael Ratner (1943-2016), a visionary human rights lawyer, served the Center for Constitutional Rights faithfully for 45 years as a staff attorney, Legal Director, and President of the Board.

Make a new or increased gift to the Michael Ratner Campaign for the Next Generation at ccrjustice.org/MRC.

JUSTICE SUSTAINERS


Monthly Donors Make Our Rapid Response Work Possible

Thank you, Justice Sustainers!

The fight for justice never stops—and it makes a huge difference to have funding we can count on to sustain our work. **Recurring monthly gifts** allow us to plan ahead and to leverage resources to respond to challenges and opportunities as they arise. That means more hope for our clients, more support for grassroots movements, and more justice for all.


New Justice Sustainers receive a free copy of Michael Ratner's autobiography, *Moving the Bar!*

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THELMA NEWMAN PLANNED GIVING SOCIETY

Supporting Justice for Generations to Come

Thelma Newman was not a wealthy woman, yet she made a six-figure bequest to the Center for Constitutional Rights and she hoped to inspire others to do the same.

Newman was the legal assistant to our co-founder Morty Stavis at the United Electrical Workers. She knew the fight for justice is long, and she wanted to support it even beyond her own lifetime.

The members of our Thelma Newman Planned Giving Society have included us in their **estate planning**. Join them and make the struggle for justice an enduring part of your legacy at ccrjustice.org/TNS.

If you would like to learn more about:

Becoming a **Justice Sustainer**, joining the **Thelma Newman Society** or supporting the **Michael Ratner Campaign for the Next Generation**, please contact our Director of Development Theda Jackson-Mau at tjackson-mau@ccrjustice.org or 212-614-6448.

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THANK YOU!