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PRESS RELEASE

**REMARKS BY FRED D. GRAY ON THE DEATH
OF CLAUDETTE COLVIN**

I mourn the recent passing of Claudette Colvin, the courageous person who helped ignite the civil rights movement seventy-one years ago. My grief is shared by many Americans who know of her early actions.

On March 2, 1955, Claudette, a 15-year-old high school student in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to obey a bus driver's order that she relinquish her seat. She was already at the back of the bus and refused to make her seat available to a white person. When she remained seated, the bus driver called police officers who dragged her from the bus and arrested her.

I am still in awe of the courage that it took for a 15-year-old school girl to defy a white bus driver and white policemen, jailers, and judges, just because she felt in her soul that it was wrong for her to pay the same fare as a white bus passenger and then be denied the same treatment.

At the time, I was a 24 -year-old attorney and readily agreed to represent Claudette, thinking that this would be the chance I had been waiting on to challenge the constitutionality of Montgomery's segregation ordinances and Alabama's segregation statutes.

As it turned out, the Colvin case proved a false start as far as giving me the opportunity to challenge Alabama's segregation laws. The juvenile court found her guilty on all charges.

Although the case did not result in a definitive challenge to the segregation laws, there were some benefits. This was my first civil rights case and it gave me courage and faith that there would be another opportunity. The opportunity came later in Browder v. Gayle, which ended bus seating in Montgomery. Claudette was one of the plaintiffs in that case.

I also believe that Claudette's act helped give Mrs. Parks the moral courage to do what she later did.

As I reflect on the passing of Ms. Colvin, I am reminded of the central role that women brought to the Civil Rights Movement. The movement had women power. In addition to Rosa Parks, Jo Ann Robinson, Coretta Scott King and others, we had strong women who were the foot soldiers of the movement, too many to name.

We also had youth power, exemplified in the courageous Claudette Colvin.

And, as I reflect back on the mistakes that were made by white leaders in the city of Montgomery, the greatest must be their underestimation of the pent-up power that black persons possessed. They never thought that their refusal to give in to our meager original demands would have resulted in the breaking down of the walls of segregation in Montgomery and the nation. It was a blessing in disguise.

Since the Colvin case in 1955, we saw civil rights victories in voting rights, gerrymandering, due process, equal access to quality education, and in opposition to medical racism (the Tuskegee Syphilis Study).

Those victories would not have occurred if it had not been for the power of suppressed people to stand together against the forces of oppression.

Unfortunately, our basic civil rights are currently under attack in the very arenas we once fought ~ in education, voting, due process, and more.

The time has come for courageous collaboration.

The enemy of justice is hopelessness. And in many places during the Jim Crow South, the enemy held the upper hand.

But Claudette Colvin gave participants in the first Civil Rights Movement the courage to act and a reason for hope.

Of that generation I am about the only one left and Claudette will be greatly missed.

But even as I mourn her passing, I find encouragement in our current struggle. I sense a growing courage among people of goodwill who desire human and civil rights for all. I see courageous people across generations, from different religions, races, and occupations who believe "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" and are ready to act.

I find encouragement in the inspiring work that Bryan Stevenson is doing at Equal Justice Initiative, the productive work of the Southern Poverty Law Center, and numerous champions for equal rights in all parts of our country.

Now is the time to foster meaningful dialogue that will lead to actionable strategies. Now is the time to be a beacon for justice and advocacy. Now is the time to resist the enemy of justice. I can imagine no greater honor to the courageous life and legacy of Claudette Colvin.

Who knows, your courage may help ignite a second civil rights movement.