



## Thomas W. Gray fought for civil rights in Montgomery and Cleveland: obituary

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**Grant Segall**  
By

Thomas W. Gray helped to lead a historic boycott to integrate buses in his native Montgomery, Ala. He later was general counsel for the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority.

Gray died Sunday, April 17, at a Montgomery hospital from complications of cancer. He was 86.

"He wasn't the kind to push himself, but he really was an unsung hero," said the Rev. Robert Graetz, a fellow leader of the 1955 boycott, which spurred the nation's civil rights movement.

Clarence Holmes, Gray's law partner in Cleveland, said, "He was very thorough and always cool and calm."

Gray never gained the fame of his younger brother, Fred, a leading civil rights lawyer, or Rosa Parks, who started the clash by refusing to step to the back of a bus. But he was a founding trustee of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which supported the boycott. He also gave rides to participants in his Plymouth.

Gray was one of 89 people charged with illegal boycotting. The charges were eventually dismissed, and the U.S. Supreme Court ordered integrated seating.

He'd lost his father at age 8 and delivered newspapers to help support his mother and four siblings. He became valedictorian of his high school and graduated from the local Alabama State University.

During World War II, he was a signalman in the South Pacific. He announced for Montgomery radio stations, taught veterans and became partners in a radio, TV and appliance store. He sold a washing machine and TVs to Rev. Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King.



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In 2009, Gray wrote for American Legacy Magazine about 1955 speech by Rev. King championing the boycott to thousands. "He energized the audience. The inspirational impact was contagious."

Gray summed up the boycott with typically understatement: "It was one of several fights that those who value freedom and equal rights would have to fight over the next decades."

Because nearby law schools were segregated, Gray entered Western Reserve University School of Law in 1960. He graduated from Cleveland Marshall College of Law in 1963. He also worked as a postal clerk and substitute teacher here.

About 1964, he moved to the Cleveland half of the Ludlow neighborhood, a national leader in voluntary integration.

The Cleveland resident practiced law at Public Square and became civil director of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. From 1969 to 1976, he led local programs called Law in Urban Affairs, Lawyers for Civil Rights Under Law and Lawyers for Housing.

Next came 12 years with Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority as assistant general counsel, then chief assistant. He handled contracts, real estate and other issues. He also served on arbitration panels for Cuyahoga Court of Common Pleas.

In 1988, Gray returned to private practice. In 1990, he became CMHA's chief counsel, overseeing five lawyers.

A year later, the Social Security Administration hired him as an administrative law judge and gave him the only vacant bench, which happened to be in Montgomery. He retired from the bench in 1998.

He was alumni president of Cleveland Marshall and Alabama State. He also led Cleveland's Norman S. Minor Bar Association. He was a trustee of the Cleveland Bar Association, Community Relations Board and Southwestern Christian College.

His wife, the former Juanita Emanuel, taught for 27 years in Cleveland, partly at Wade Park and Woodland Hills.

While in Cleveland, he belonged to Mount Pleasant Church of Christ. He liked to golf, bowl, travel and play pinochle.

His brother Fred said, "Tom enjoyed living."

**Thomas Walker Gray Sr.**

**1924-2011**

**Survivors:** wife, the former Juanita Emanuel; daughter, Karen Gray Houston of Silver Spring, Md.; sons, Thomas Jr. of Columbus and Frederick L. of Montgomery, Ala.; two brothers and a sister.

**Funeral:** already held.

**Contributions:** Thomas and Juanita Gray Scholarship, Trust for Educational Excellence, Alabama State University, 915 S. Jackson St., Montgomery, AL 36101.

**Arrangements:** Phillips Riley Funeral Home, Montgomery, Ala.

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