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As we celebrate the arrival of 2013, it is imperative that we reflect upon the 50 years of civil rights victories and struggles since the historic year of 1963, which, in many ways, launched the modern civil rights movement. It was during this time of transformative change for our nation that the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law was established.

The summer of 1963 saw murders, bombs, beatings, jailing and threats to those who sought an equal society. It also witnessed the collective public rise up through open demonstrations and other joint public actions that sought to expose and end racial discrimination and segregation. On June 11, Alabama Governor George Wallace made his infamous vow to prevent court-ordered desegregation of the University of Alabama. On June 12, Medgar Evers, field secretary for the NAACP, was tragically assassinated by a member of the White Citizens Council in Jackson, Mississippi. On August 28, at the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. inspired the world with his "I Have a Dream" speech.

Facing this unprecedented time of strife and hope, President John F. Kennedy took to national television to call for a new positive civil rights legal framework, stating, "...it is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets."

On June 21, 1963, he convened a historic meeting of some 244 lawyers from throughout the United States and called for the formation of the Lawyers' Committee to mobilize the considerable "pro bono" resources of the private bar in the leadership of the fight for racial justice. I have been privileged to lead this organization for the last 24 years. As we celebrate our 50th anniversary this year with the national "Toward Justice" Campaign, we will be engaging an army of lawyers, grassroots activists and ordinary Americans for racial and social justice and inspiring a new generation of leaders. Our Campaign is chaired by the great civil rights leader Rep. John Lewis. Along with his wife Lillian Miles Lewis, who sadly passed away on December 31, 2012, Congressman Lewis has fought for decades to utilize the political sphere to advance

civil rights.

In the 50 years since 1963, we have seen major legislative civil rights victories, including the passage of landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act and Fair Housing Act. Additionally, we have fought in the courts on behalf of millions of clients to give true meaning to the promise of racial justice, emboldened in the states by the enforcement of these laws by private attorney generals. Yet our nation still faces tremendous challenges.

During the 2012 elections, we successfully battled against new voter suppression laws in 46 states designed to disenfranchise specific categories of voters including racial minorities, the young, the elderly, low-income and the disabled. Those proposed laws represented a symptom of the many inequities that still exist in our beloved nation. Voting is but one of a myriad of civil rights inequities that continue to persist:

African-Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of Whites; eight times more African-American children attend high poverty schools than do White children; poverty rates for African-American and Hispanic families triple that of White families; and the unemployment rates for minorities remain in or bordering on double digits (African-Americans at 14.0 percent and Hispanics at 9.6 percent), while the unemployment rate for Whites is 6.9 percent. The Lawyers' Committee's broad and innovative programmatic agenda in the courts, legislatures, transactional services and public policy and public education arenas will be critical in combating these barriers and opening up our society for true racial equality and social justice.

In 2013, we must remain vigilant and engaged and demand that the government is proactively leading the entire nation toward justice and equality for all. The Lawyers' Committee and our many allies will continue to win battles, as we did fighting against voter suppression tactics that could have impeded as many as five million Americans from casting their ballots in the presidential election. Through the courts and good old-fashioned voter education and mobilization, we demonstrated to the enemies of Democracy that they would never have a free hand to oppose justice. We have also demonstrated that whenever evil tactics abound, "we the people" will rise up with a standard of justice to oppose it.

Moving into 2013 and beyond we must keep our eyes on the prize that remains elusive even 50 years later, remaining unified and ever vigilant against the ignorance and intolerance that impedes racial progress in America.

Barbara R. Arnwine is president and executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. The Lawyers' Committee is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, formed in 1963 at the request of President John F. Kennedy to enlist the private bar's leadership and resources in combating racial discrimination and the resulting inequality of opportunity - work that continues to be vital today. For more information, please visit www.lawyerscommittee.org .