

Center for Constitutional Rights

Discrimination, Detention, and Deportation: Immigration & Refugees

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/blog/2016/05/12/ccr-mourns-loss-hero-michael-ratner>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The CCR blog

It is with a very heavy heart that we write to tell you of a great loss to our family. Today, we lost one of the great social justice warriors of our time, Michael Ratner. In July 2015, Michael fell ill. But he fought his illness in the same manner as he did all of the injustices he encountered for the last half century; with clarity, tenacity, good cheer, the support of his loving family and friends, and hope for the best possible outcome against the odds. Sadly, this was one fight that he wasn't able to win. We send our deepest condolences to his family and to all of those who knew and loved him.

Family members say Michael was born with the empathy gene, which made him a wonderful and loyal friend. While a law student at Columbia University in 1968 this empathy and compassion helped him find his political focus during student protests against the Vietnam War. While participating in a building occupation on campus Michael was pushed to the ground and beaten by the police. Seeing his bloodied classmates who were, like him, standing up for what's right, he decided he would always stand on the side of the oppressed and against the oppressor. A law student was pushed down; a radical rose up. In his words, [E]vents like this created the activists of the generation and I never looked back; I declared that I was going to spend my life on the side of justice and non-violence. And this is exactly what Michael did until his last breath.

After law school Michael was drawn to the Center for Constitutional Rights; it would be his political home for over 40 years. He started as a staff attorney on the same day as another lost CCR hero, Rhonda Copelon, who along with other CCR colleagues, built gender work into the Center's portfolio in the early 1970s. Through the years, Michael came to embrace international law as a key tool for the Center through the counsel of Rhonda and former CCR Vice President, Peter Weiss. This work, along with Michael's tenacity and spirit remain the defining features of CCR 50 years after it was founded.

Michael was the organizational bridge between the work of CCR's founders, from whom he learned how to litigate boldly and work with social movements, and our current generation of lawyers and advocates. He was a mentor and inspiration to generations of law students and lawyers who have come through CCR. Twenty-four years ago, I was one of these students. When I first met Michael as a CCR Ella Baker Intern, I saw someone who lived the vision for how a radical people's lawyer could almost literally shift the world for the most precarious in our society, by shifting the ground under the most powerful. But what really shifted, was me. Hearing his stories of representing clients and political movements from every corner of the globe, I came to see how I could use my law degree for something extraordinary and eternal. It was my honor to have later served with him on CCR's Board and to work in partnership as the Executive Director of the organization we both cherished.

In accepting the Center's Relentless Radical Award in 2012, Michael explained why he chose to spend his career in partnership with CCR: I believed then and I still believe today, that it is the place that will change the world. I am as excited to walk into the Center today as I was that first day. And I still believe it is the place that will change the world.

Jules Lobel, CCR's Board President and frequent CCR co-counsel with Michael, shared Michael was the moral and political compass for me and CCR. He was the spirit of the Center: his approach to litigation and working with communities, his fortitude in waging long running campaigns, and the values he held dear. These will outlive him and continue to impact CCR's work for generations.

Michael had the vision to see things on the horizon that others barely glimpsed, often dismissed, or were convinced simply didn't exist. From his work at CCR challenging US imperialism and oppression through policies of brutal militarism from Central America, Iraq and at home, Michael stood for peaceful conflict resolution and accountability for the inevitable abuse that accompanies the use of force. He never shied away from a fight, no matter the odds; indeed, it is likely he specifically selected the cases with the longest odds. After all, those involved in these cases were most in need of solidarity, support and a legal ally. This was obvious in the years he spent dedicated to exposing conditions facing Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and advocating for adherence to international law and recognition of their human rights.

Katherine Franke, CCR's Board Chair, reflects on the legacy that Michael has left us with:

He was among the most visionary lawyers of our generation, holding the U.S. government accountable when it went to war illegally, tortured its citizens, withheld state secrets, limited the rights of a free press, persecuted political dissidents and in countless other contexts. There has hardly been a progressive social movement in the last 45 years that Michael hasn't been part of, contributing his phenomenally creative and cutting edge legal mind. All of us who treasure freedom and oppose oppressive state violence owe a debt of gratitude to Michael Ratner.

Michael's special gift was his ability to turn an urgent problem into a meaningful, hard-hitting lawsuit. He sometimes won in court, but he

always won in the court of public opinion; even if it took the rest of the world a decade to get there. Among his many iconic wins was gaining freedom for HIV+ Haitians held at Guantnamo Bay in 1993. This experience prepared him to recognize what was at stake when the first men were transferred to Guantnamo in 2001 he knew that this was an attempt to place them beyond the reach of the law, the courts, reporters or lawyers. Within months of the 9/11 attacks Michael had made a compelling case for why CCR, alone among U.S. organizations, and at the great risk of losing support, should take up the challenge to these detentions.

No target was too daunting; Michael went after dictators, torturers, corporations, and the military, and he challenged the impunity of government officials everywhere. Famously antiwar, he represented members of Congress three times over two decades in challenges to executive war making, and he represented solidarity activists who fought for peace. He fought in domestic and international legal forums for the victims of U.S. oppression in Central America, to end the illegal U.S. blockade of Cuba, and for independence for Puerto Rico. Most recently, he represented journalist Julian Assange and WikiLeaks in support of whistleblowers who expose abuses and provide access to information; two things a democracy needs to be both morally accountable and functional.

Michael dedicated his life to the most important justice causes of the last half century. He was the second wave of peoples lawyers at CCR, its first Legal Director, and longtime Board Member and Board President; and as such helped shape the course of the work for four decades. He is survived by the legacy he created at CCR. We were undeservedly fortunate to have had so much of Michaels vision, time and leadership over these many years. We send his wife Karen Ranucci, and children Jake and Ana, and the rest of his close-knit family a heartfelt embrace from the entire CCR family.

We close with Michaels words: There is not the same sense of strength in struggle that you can change things, not as there was in the 60s and 70s. You get to the point where you have a very conservative government and you feel like you are only a flickering light. But we have to keep the light lit.

We will keep the light lit for you Michael.

[View the discussion thread.](#)

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