

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/eji-remembers-prisoners-rights-champion-al-bronstein/>

Policy Issue Resources

Criminal Justice Reform

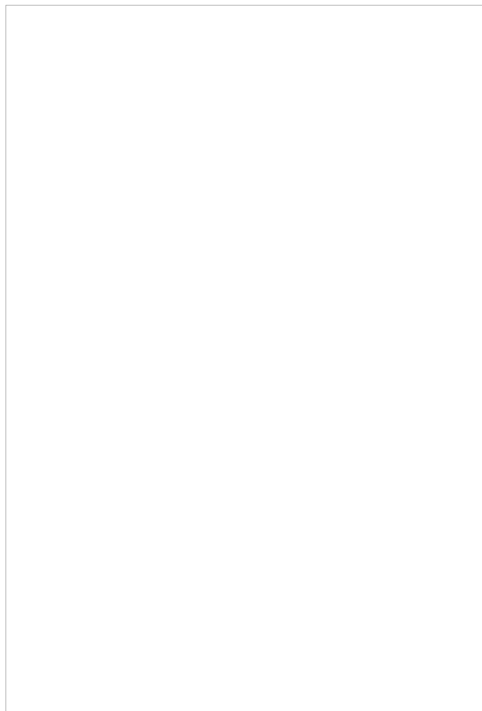
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10.27.15



Alvin J. Bronstein, visionary advocate for prison reform, passed away last week. EJI remembers his tireless work on behalf of incarcerated people and honors his legacy.

Mr. Bronstein believed that prison reform must not be limited to improving prison conditions and challenging the awful things that go on in our jails and prisons. It must also be about reducing the use of imprisonment in this country. While acknowledging the success of past litigation efforts, he urged prison reformers to engage in public education and organizing community members. In recent years he focused on the need for American prison reformers to draw support from international human rights standards.

Mr. Bronstein was a lawyer in private practice in Brooklyn and general counsel for Brooklyn CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) when he volunteered for the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee, a main source of legal assistance for student activists in the South who were registering African American voters during Freedom Summer in 1964. In 1965, he became LCDCs Chief Counsel in Jackson, Mississippi, and went on to serve as a strategist and trial counsel for dozens of organizations representing minorities, consumers, and the indigent, and taught at the Kennedy School of Government and American University.

The highlight of his distinguished career was the nearly 25 years he spent as executive director of the ACLUs National Prison Project. Under his leadership, the NPP initiated lawsuits in 45 states, challenged the entire prison system in ten states, and closed the state penitentiary in Vermont. It won decrees in 15 states implementing prison reforms. Mr. Bronsteins staff challenged conditions in the

Alabama prison system and persuaded Judge Frank Johnson to order sweeping changes throughout the states prisons.

In *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU*, Samuel Walker wrote that Bronstein developed a curious love/hate relationship with many officials. Guards at the Rhode Island prison thanked him for making it a safer place to work and informally named the new fire escape, built as a result of the ACLU suit, after him. Some prison officials welcomed, if not invited, Prison Project suits, discovering that it was their best hope for getting needed money from their state legislatures. As in the area of policing, litigation spurred other reforms, including an accreditation movement for correctional facilities.

In 1989, he was named a MacArthur Fellow for his contributions to prisoners rights and institutional reform. The National Law Journal identified him no fewer than four times as one of the most influential lawyers in the nation. He recruited, trained, and mentored countless civil rights lawyers throughout his career.

As ACLU executive director Ira Glasser wrote in 1995: This country is a better and more moral place because of Al Bronstein. He helped bring the rule of law and shine the light of liberty into some of the cruelest and most unjust corners of our land. He answered the call. He is a true American hero.

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