

## CELEBRATING EDGAR CAHN'S 81ST BIRTHDAY

James J. Sandman  
President, Legal Services Corporation  
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Tonight we celebrate the remarkable Edgar Cahn – a visionary, a dreamer, and an idealist who is also an entrepreneur, a builder, and a pragmatist.

Edgar has an extraordinary ability to turn big ideas into concrete realities that change the world for the better. He is proof of the difference one person can make.

I'd like to give just two of many examples of Edgar's accomplishments that have changed lives.

- *Edgar and his late wife Jean created the blueprint for the first federally funded, national system of neighborhood legal services offices to serve low-income people.* They published their concept in the July 1964 issue of the *Yale Law Journal*, in an article entitled "The War on Poverty: A Civilian Perspective." The citation is 73 *Yale L.J.* 1317. I know it by heart.

I can think of no more than a handful of law review articles that have had a profound impact on law or society. This is one of them. The article came to the attention of Sargent Shriver, who was then heading President Johnson's War on Poverty as Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity. Shriver said that when he read the article, he felt like Columbus discovering America. He said the article captured his mind and his imagination, and he decided to incorporate a legal services program into the War on Poverty. Jean Camper Cahn was the first director of the program.

The concept of a federally funded legal services program was controversial. It ran into resistance from, of all places, the legal profession. Edgar and Jean realized that if the concept were to succeed, it would need to win the support of the American Bar Association. They were instrumental in getting the ABA, then headed by Lewis Powell, later to become a Supreme Court Justice, to approve their idea. When the issue was put to a vote of the ABA's House of Delegates, it passed unanimously.

By the late 1960s, federally funded legal aid programs blanketed the country. And in 1974, Congress institutionalized the program by passing the Legal Services Corporation Act. Today the Legal Services Corporation is the country's single largest funder of civil legal aid programs. We fund 134 independent legal aid programs with more than 800 offices serving every county in every state, and the American territories as well. No matter where you are in the United States, there is an LSC-funded legal aid program serving low-income people. Edgar did that.

Edgar's influence on legal aid in the United States is reflected in another way. Edgar's and Jean's *Yale Law Journal* article emphasized that neighborhood legal services offices must be client-centric. Today, the law requires that at least *one-third* of the members of the board of directors of any legal aid program funded by the Legal Services Corporation be eligible clients. Clients have not only a voice, but a vote in the leadership of LSC-funded legal aid programs. Thank you, Edgar.

- *A second accomplishment: Edgar and Jean founded Antioch Law School in 1972, the direct predecessor of the UDC David A. Clark School of Law. It was the first law school in the United States to educate law students primarily through clinical training in legal services for the poor. Despite the increasing emphasis on experiential legal education and clinical programs in recent years, no other law school can hold a candle to this one for the breadth, depth, and quality of its clinical programs. And despite the increasing emphasis on public interest work and pro bono programs in many law schools, no other law school comes close to this one for its public interest impact and service to the poor.*

What explains Edgar's success? Why has he had such a profound influence?

The answer starts, I think, with Edgar's brilliance. This holder of three graduate degrees from Yale – an M.A., a Ph.D., and a J.D. – is scary smart. But I believe his impact is even more the result of his personal character and the values that infuse his work. There has always been complete consistency between who Edgar is as a person and what he does for a living. He has a passion for justice and a personal commitment to redressing injustice. He has a deep faith in the dignity, value, and virtue of

every person. He looks for and finds the good in people, and he motivates positively, not negatively. He has an approach to the law that is rooted in respect for the client, every client, no matter what his or her station in life. And he has a generosity of spirit that pervades everything he does.

Edgar says that we need to ask ourselves two questions: Why are we here? What kind of world do we want to leave behind? I don't know exactly how Edgar would answer those questions for himself, but I suspect his answer would reflect an obligation to correct injustice, a desire to make and leave the world a better place, and a humble recognition of the interdependence of people in every community.

Edgar could have done anything with his life. With his intellect, his creativity, his entrepreneurship, and his ability to turn innovative ideas into high-functioning institutions, he could have become a billionaire. But he chose a different path. He chose a path of service.

Marian Wright Edelman has said, "Service is the rent we pay for being." Edgar, you have paid enough service rent to have earned the right to be in perpetuity.

Happy Birthday, Edgar.