



Clarence B. Jones, a former speechwriter and attorney for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Joe Biden at the White House on May 3 in Washington. (The White House/X)

Nate Tinner-Williams

[View Author Profile](#)

Black Catholic Messenger

[View Author Profile](#)

## [\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

May 7, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

[Clarence B. Jones](#), the erstwhile speechwriter and attorney for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., received the Presidential Medal of Freedom on May 3 at the White House, one of 19 honored by President Joe Biden in Washington — including a number of Jones' fellow Catholics.

The 93-year-old advocate was present among a group of awardees of the nation's highest civilian honor, including gang interventionist Jesuit Fr. [Greg Boyle](#); former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi; former Secretary of State John Kerry; and seven-time Olympic gold medalist Katie Ledecky. Civil rights icon [Medgar Evers](#) was honored posthumously.

"It has been the greatest honor of my life to work closely with Dr. King and to do my best every day to carry forward his legacy. Today, I am grateful to receive this honor for continuing to support his work," Jones said in a statement on May 3.

## Advertisement

Jones — raised partly by Catholic nuns at Holy Providence, a [Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament](#) boarding school in Pennsylvania — studied at Juilliard and Columbia before becoming a lawyer, finance executive, and the first Black American on the New York Stock Exchange.

After helping King win a tax fraud trial in 1960, Jones became a public face in the Civil Rights Movement, which he remained throughout its heyday.

A member of King's well-known "research committee," Jones helped draft the landmark "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech King delivered in 1963 and helped distribute the "[Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)" earlier that year. Afterward, he would assist in protecting King's copyright privileges to his most famous speech.

"Jones wielded a pen as a sword and gave words to the movement that generated freedom for millions of people," said Biden during the ceremony.

"He helped define the enduring ideas included in the 'Dream' that will be ever forever engraved in the ethos of America. ... Thank you, Dr. Jones."

Following King's death, Jones went on to serve as a negotiator in the infamous [Attica Prison Riot](#) in 1971. He had relocated to New York in the 1960s to be close to the

local headquarters of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#), which King led nationally as its first president. During the early 1970s, Jones was also editor and part owner of the [New York Amsterdam News](#), one of the nation's oldest Black newspapers.

**[Related: Fr. Greg Boyle, Nancy Pelosi among Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients](#)**

In 2018, Jones co-founded the [Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice](#) at the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit-run school in California where he served until his retirement in 2021. He was awarded an honorary degree by the school in 2019.

"Jones has spent his adult life supporting and furthering the work of his friend, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Clarence brought that legacy to USF, where he has been a leader in the fight against hate," said University of San Francisco president Jesuit Fr/ [Paul J. Fitzgerald](#). "We are proud of him."

Jones is the third Black Catholic to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Biden, after fellow civil rights activist [Diane Nash](#) and the legendary gymnast [Simone Biles](#) in 2022.

"President Biden often says there is nothing beyond our capacity when we act together," the White House said in a statement announcing this year's honorees.

"These nineteen Americans built teams, coalitions, movements, organizations, and businesses that shaped America for the better. They are the pinnacle of leadership in their fields. They consistently demonstrated over their careers the power of community, hard work, and service."

***Editor's note:*** This story was [originally published](#) at *Black Catholic Messenger*.