

Holocaust survivor has dedicated his career to serving others

By [Amanda Robert](#)

[November 1, 2019, 1:30 am CDT](#)

John Rosenberg likes to tell people we're in a country where the rule of law means something, where no one is above the law.

"Lawyers make a difference," he says. "We have demonstrated in our work that we can have a great impact and make our society a better one."

That message carries immense weight coming from a Holocaust survivor who immigrated to the United States as a child and turned his persecution into a passion for public service.

As a civil rights attorney with the Department of Justice, he fought discrimination and segregation in the South during the 1960s. Later, as the founder and director of the Appalachian Research and Defense Fund, also known as AppalReD, in Prestonsburg, Kentucky, he provided people living in poverty with free legal aid for more than 30 years.

Rosenberg, who is now 88, didn't stop there. He co-founded the Appalachian Citizens' Law Center, a nonprofit law firm that represents coalminers and their families. He became of counsel to local firm Pillersdorf, DeRossett & Lane, where he is connecting hundreds of eastern Kentuckians who lost their disability benefits with attorneys.

He has also had leadership roles with the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service and the Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants, as well as with the Kentucky Bar Association and the Kentucky Public Advocacy Commission. He has also served on a task force, a commission and a judicial ethics committee for the Kentucky Supreme Court.

Former Kentucky Public Advocate Ed Monahan, who served on the board of directors for AppalReD, describes Rosenberg as possessing a “fierce, indefatigable love of neighbor.”

“As I think about him and where he came from in Germany, what he has been through, what he has chosen to do and how he conducts himself, I see him as a minister of hope and justice,” Monahan says. “He is always fighting. He is always hopeful.”

Coming to America

Rosenberg was born in Magdeburg, Germany, a city about 100 miles from Berlin. His family lived next to the synagogue where his father taught Jewish students after they were no longer allowed to attend public schools.

On Nov. 9, 1938—known as Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass—Nazi soldiers forced his family out of their home and into the courtyard. The soldiers took religious scrolls and books from the synagogue and burned them. Then they blew up the synagogue.

“We stood there,” Rosenberg says. “I was 7 years old; my brother was 2 and was in my mother’s arms.” [READ MORE](#)

Last updated on October 29, 2019.

Print

Table of Contents

NEWS

News & publications

The news about recent activities for needed peoples.

[More News](#)

28 Jul 2025

Three Years Later: Still Recovering, Still Growing, Still Fighting

By Sarah CurryIt's been three years since eastern Kentuckians woke in a panic...

[Continue Reading](#)

23 Jul 2025



Legal experts share advice on eviction notices

HAZARD, Ky. (WYMT) - Officials with AppalReD Legal Aid shared advice on...

[Continue Reading](#)