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Justice ain't much if you can't afford it. America needs to overhaul its civil law | Opinion

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Opinion Civil rights Justice

In America, we are raised with the promise of "justice for all." But after decades as a civil rights and civil legal aid lawyer, I know firsthand that our nation falls far short of that ideal. Not until we fix our broken civil justice system so that it serves everyone—not just the wealthy and the powerful – can we fulfill that promise.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s marked me for life. At my all-white public school in Jackson, Mississippi, I pledged allegiance daily to the ideal of justice for all, while around me a fierce battle raged over a system of racial apartheid that made a mockery of that pledge. I went to law school to become a civil rights lawyer, dreaming of doing my part to dismantle Jim Crow. In my youthful naivete, I thought that by the time I got my law degree, the legal work would be almost done and I would be too late to help.

I needn't have worried. In southeast Mississippi, where I founded the first civil legal aid program to serve the area in the 1970s, we won high-impact litigation to redress race discrimination in employment and housing, to secure the voting rights of African-Americans, and to end inhumane conditions at county jails.

But even as we used the legal system to fight racial injustice, we saw that access to the system

was a privilege only for those who could afford it. Mississippi's civil courts themselves caused and exacerbated poverty and injustice. Take, for instance, what happened to my friend David Lipman, when he was still wet behind the ears as a legal aid lawyer in the Delta. Civil rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer called to ask for his help. On his drive to meet her, David had visions of the groundbreaking civil rights case Mrs. Hamer would ask him to handle.

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