

Kansas girl at center of 1954 school segregation ruling dies

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Linda Brown, who as a Kansas girl was at the center of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling that struck down racial segregation in schools, has died at age 76.

Her father, Oliver Brown, tried to enroll the family in an all-white school in Topeka, and the case was sparked when he and several black families were turned away. The NAACP's legal arm brought the lawsuit to challenge segregation in public schools, and Oliver Brown became lead plaintiff in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision by the Supreme Court that ended school segregation.

Sherrilyn Ifill, president and director-counsel at NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., said in a statement that Linda Brown is one of a band of heroic young people who, along with her family, courageously fought to end the ultimate symbol of white supremacy — racial segregation in public schools.

"She stands as an example of how ordinary schoolchildren took center stage in transforming this country. It was not easy for her or her family, but her sacrifice broke barriers and changed the meaning of equality in this country," Ifill said.

Peaceful Rest Funeral Chapel of Topeka confirmed that Linda Brown died Sunday afternoon. No cause of death was released. Funeral arrangements are pending.

Her sister, Cheryl Brown Henderson, founding president of The Brown Foundation, confirmed the death to The Topeka Capital-Journal . She declined comment from the family.

The landmark case was brought before the Supreme Court by the NAACP's legal arm to challenge segregation in public schools. It began after several black families in Topeka were turned down when they tried to enroll their children in white schools near their homes. The lawsuit was joined with cases from Delaware, South Carolina, Virginia and the District of Columbia.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that separating black and white children was unconstitutional because it denied black children the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law. "In the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place," Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote. "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

The Brown decision overturned the court's Plessy v. Ferguson decision, which on May 18, 1896, established a "separate but equal" doctrine for black's in public facilities.

"Sixty-four years ago, a young girl from Topeka, Kansas sparked a case that ended segregation in public schools in America," Kansas Gov. Jeff Colyer said in a statement. "Linda Brown's life reminds us that by standing up for our principles and serving our communities we can truly change the world. Linda's legacy is a crucial part of the American story and continues to inspire the millions

who have realized the American dream because of her."

Brown v. Board was a historic marker in the Civil Rights movement, likely the most high-profile case brought by Thurgood Marshall and the lawyers of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund in their decade-plus campaign to chip away at the doctrine of "separate but equal."

"Her legacy is not only here but nationwide," Kansas Deputy Education Commissioner Dale Dennis said.

Oliver Brown, for whom the case was named, became a minister at a church in Springfield, Missouri. He died of a heart attack in 1961. Linda Brown and her sister founded in 1988 the Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence and Research.

The foundation says on its webpage that it was established as a living tribute to the attorneys, community organizers and plaintiffs in the landmark Supreme Court decision. Its mission is to build upon their work and keep the ideals of the decision relevant for future generations.

"We are to be grateful for the family that stood up for what is right," said Democratic state Rep. Annie Kuether of Topeka. "That made a difference to the rest of the world."

Associated Press