

The CBCF Posthumously Presents Aretha Franklin with the Inaugural John. R. Lewis Award of Courage



Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. Left to right: Congresswoman Brenda Lawrence (D-Michigan), Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), Congressman John R. Lewis (D-Georgia), Sabrina Owens, and Vaughn Franklin

During the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's (CBCF) 48th Annual Phoenix Award Dinner at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C., Aretha Franklin was named the first recipient of the John R. Lewis Award of

Courage by the CBCF and the organization's chairperson, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas). The award was presented by Lewis, Jackson Lee, and Congresswoman Brenda Lawrence of (D-Michigan).

Hosted by actors Lamman Rucker and Vivica A. Fox, the Phoenix Awards also honored Lee Porter, Executive Director of The Fair Housing Council of Northern New Jersey; Bryan Stevenson, founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative; Tommy Smith and John Carlos, 1968 Olympians and activists; the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., and Mrs. Jacqueline Brown Jackson, among other presentations, tributes, and performances. The event also included a keynote address by the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, Pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, N.C.

Sabrina Owens and Vaughn Franklin, Franklin's niece and nephew, respectively, were on hand to accept the honor. Each gave a moving speech about their beloved aunt, giving personal glimpses into Aretha Franklin's lifelong commitment to civil rights and sharing examples of her activism.

Sabrina Owens noted: "On behalf of the Franklin family, we are honored to be here tonight. There are three things that my aunt, Aretha Franklin loved: Family, food, and politics. For many years, my aunt appreciated all the hard work that the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation have done to move the agenda forward on Civil Rights, Human Rights, and, let's be honest, Women's Rights. To Congressman John R. Lewis: We applaud you for your commitment to public service. For decades, you have been on the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement; and like my grandfather, Rev. C.L. Franklin, who was part of the Movement, my aunt has tried to follow in the footsteps and legacy of her father, you and so many others. Through her travels with her father, Aretha learned that to whom much is given, much is expected. And whether it was soothing the souls of the world with her music; feeding the hungry of the Detroit community; providing shelter for those who have lost their homes or providing fresh water to the people of Flint or providing financial contributions to organizations that speak for those with little voice in seeking better opportunities for jobs, education or criminal justice reform, my Aunt never shied away from the responsibilities as a concerned citizen of the

world.â€

Vaughn Franklin also underscored his auntâ€™s support for social justice:â€ At a very young age, Civil-Rights surrounded our aunt. She spent her career supporting those who fought for equality. In the 1960s, she had a clause written in her contract that she would never perform for a segregated audience. In 1970 when Angela Davisâ€ was arrested, she was ready to cover Ms. Davisâ€™s bond regardless of the amount. Our aunt stated during an interview that her father didnâ€™t know what she was doing [regarding Arethaâ€™s support for Angela Davis]. Of course,â€ sheâ€ respected her father, but she was willing to help set Angela Davisâ€ freeâ€ if there was any justice in our courts. She did that not because she believed in Communism, but because Angela Davis was a black woman and she wanted freedom for black people. Our aunt stated that she had the money, andâ€ sheâ€ got it from black people. They [black people] made her financially able to have it, and she wanted to use it in ways that will help our people.â€ Mr. Lewis, you help to pave the way to the door of freedom and equality for so many Americans; and she would be honored to receive The John R. Lewis Award for Courage.â€ To Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee: My aunt loved you, andâ€ she enjoyed watching you on television in the Congressional Hearings and on the news. She would say, â€Getâ€ em, Congresswoman!â€ and she would be honored to know that you made this night possible for her and her family. On behalf of theâ€ Franklinâ€ family, we would also like to thank: The Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and its Board of Directors; Congresswoman Brenda Lawrence and the Detroit Delegation for their outpouring of love and support; Congresswoman Val Demings; and Tirrell D. Whittley of Liquid Soul.â€

Ms. Franklin, 76, passed away Aug. 16, 2018, at her home in Detroit, surrounded by family. Twice voted as the Number One Greatest Singer of All Time byâ€ *Rolling Stone*â€ Magazine, Franklinâ€ is the recipient of the U.S.A.â€™s highest civilian honor,â€ The Presidential Medal of Freedom, as well as 18 competitive Grammy Awards, theâ€ Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, and aâ€ Grammy Living Legendâ€ honor. â€ She was the youngest individual ever to receive the coveted Kennedy Center Honor; the first female inductee into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame;â€ the second female inductee into theâ€ UK Music Hall of

Fame; and an inductee into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame. Aretha was the first woman, and the fourth artist in history to achieve 100 R&B *Billboard* charted singles.