Civil Rights Icon John Lewis Dies of Pancreatic Cancer at 80

His indomitable spirit remained intact even during his fight with the disease.

July 20, 2020 By Alicia Green

On July 17, Democratic U.S. Representative John Lewis, 80, died following a battle with metastatic pancreatic cancer, CNN reports. The civil rights icon, who marched for voting rights with Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965, had announced his diagnosis in December.

“It is with inconsolable grief and enduring sadness that we announce the passing of U.S. Rep. John Lewis,” said his family in a statement. “He was honored and respected as the conscience of the U.S. Congress and an icon of American history, but we knew him as a loving father and brother.”

“He was a stalwart champion in the ongoing struggle to demand respect for the dignity and worth of every human being. He dedicated his entire life to nonviolent activism and was an outspoken advocate in the struggle for equal justice in America. He will be deeply missed.”

After he received his diagnosis, Lewis said he would do what he always had—fight. “I am going to fight it and keeping fighting for the beloved community,” he echoed. “We still have many bridges to cross.”

He expressed being “clear-eyed” about his prognosis but began treatment immediately. Doctors thought he had a fighting chance due to medical advances that have made pancreatic cancer treatable in many cases.

Lewis’s fight for people and justice—he called it “good trouble”—began in the early 1960s. He took part in lunch counter sit-ins, joined the Freedom Riders to challenge bus segregation and helped organize the historic 1963 March on Washington. (At just 23 years old, he was the event’s youngest speaker.)

He continued his efforts once he arrived in Washington, DC, in 1987. Lewis was a strong proponent of helping poor and young people through improved education and health care. At the time of his death, he was serving his 17th term as a congressman representing Georgia’s 5th Congressional District.

Lewis was also an ally to the HIV community. For National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day in

February, he introduced the HIV Epidemic Loan-Repayment Act. The legislation was created to help support existing health care professionals and encourage those who aspire to support those living with HIV.

He never lost his fighting spirit, not even in his final months. He addressed the recent protests about police brutality in the United States and visited young activists at the Black Lives Matter mural in DC.

I know your pain, your rage, your sense of despair and hopelessness. Justice has, indeed, been denied for far too long. Rioting, looting, and burning is not the way. Organize. Demonstrate. Sit-in. Stand-up. Vote. Be constructive, not destructive. https://t.co/YbB14dgzr9

— John Lewis (@repjohnlewis) May 30, 2020

.@RepJohnLewis: hero, champion & challenge to conscience of the nation. Your visit with the newest voices for justice at the Black Lives Matter mural with @MayorBowser was wonderful & iconic. Thank you for that final public statement in furtherance of a more perfect union. pic.twitter.com/Us1tCmsYYd

— Nancy Pelosi (@SpeakerPelosi) July 18, 2020

Just weeks before his death, a documentary exploring his life and legacy was released. John Lewis: Good Trouble features interviews from 80-year-old Lewis, his family, political leaders and Congressional colleagues.

“I wish people could feel the warmth of this man’s smile,” Erika Alexander, actress and one of the documentary’s producers, told NPR. She worked with him during the fall before he was diagnosed and he continued to be an active participant as he was being treated. “I think he understood that he wouldn’t be here that long,” Alexander said.

“He had endured all those things and he still was a happy warrior…He was happy to be of service. He is his own best advertisement for why Democracy matters. He also showed us that we should have the power of optimism and hope to move us forward.”

For related coverage, read “The 15 White Coats, a Group of Black Med Students, Aims for Racial Reform in Medicine” and “The Cancer Health 25: Change Makers” to learn about remarkable individuals making a difference every day.

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