

James D. Lorenz, Jr., 78, Founder of California Rural Legal Assistance

By Theodore R. Marmor and Richard W. Parks: H'60 Classmates. March 16, 2017

James D. Lorenz, Jr., reformer and social entrepreneur, died January 19, 2017. He was 78. In 1966, Lorenz founded the innovative California Rural Legal Assistance, (CRLA), the first statewide law firm for farm workers and the rural poor. Over its more than fifty years, CRLA has represented millions of low-income Californians in individual and class-action suits.

Lorenz was not only the founder of CRLA, but also its energetic first executive director. He recruited United Farm Worker organizers, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, to his Board of Directors and began opening what would eventually be eighteen offices throughout California. His aim was to provide legal representation for low-income rural Californians comparable to that provided to growers and other corporations by elite law firms.

In 1967, after Governor Reagan severely cut California's Medi-Cal program for the poor and elderly, CRLA sued and won a California Supreme Court Case that forced the Reagan Administration to return more than \$210 million to the Medi-Cal budget. A December 15, 1967 Time magazine article featured Lorenz, the creation of CRLA, and CRLA's early accomplishments. These successes cemented CRLA's reputation for gifted representation of their low-income clients but earned Governor Reagan's enmity. Reagan vetoed CRLA's request for OEO funding and supported, along with agribusiness interests, the later-discredited Uhler Report's attack on CRLA in 1971. Lorenz helped to muster a coalition of supporters in the U.S. Senate sufficient to block the defunding attempt and keep CRLA alive.

CRLA has accumulated a superb record of wins in both the California and the U.S. Supreme Courts. In addition, it has stimulated legislation that has greatly benefited the health and safety of agricultural workers. Over 3,000 newspaper articles, magazine articles, and TV specials have covered the legal and political work of Lorenz and his colleagues.

In 1974, Lorenz helped with Jerry Brown's election campaign, and Brown appointed him to his cabinet as Director of the state Employment Development Department, but disputes between the two soon led to Lorenz's firing. Lorenz responded by writing a highly critical political biography, Jerry Brown: The Man on the White Horse. As an ironic memento of his EDD experience, he received an unemployment check, carrying his own signature, that he kept uncashed for many years.

Lorenz continued to practice law, and for the rest of his career, he remained an iconoclast, writing op-eds, essays, and drafts of books, few of which were published. Over time he became more critical of what he regarded as liberal shibboleths. He devoted some of his legal knowledge to attacking a wide range of what he regarded as abuses of the underprivileged. Those attacks, however, included lawsuits against his former colleagues in CRLA and the UFW.

This unexpected development prompted renewed interest in Lorenz. In February of 1998, The Wall Street Journal devoted a long, biographical essay by Jess Bravin and Julio Laboy to the CRLA founder under the headline "Onetime Labor Activist is Now Taking on UFW." The reporters highlighted the irony of Lorenz's legal attacks on the organizations he had founded and

long supported. Lorenz had, in the 1990s, they contended, “made a virtual profession of suing the UFW and CRLA.” Lorenz’s response was simple: “that was then and now is now,” and he would not “forswear his early identification with the underprivileged.” This was obviously not an interpretation with which either CRLA or the UFW would agree.

James D. Lorenz, Jr. was born March 23, 1938 in Dayton, Ohio, son of James Douglas Lorenz, a prominent architect, and Helen Walper Lorenz. He attended Phillips Academy and studied history at Harvard College, graduating in 1960. His marriage to Diana Smith in 1960 ended in divorce. After a brief stint in the army he got his LL.B. from Harvard Law School in 1964 and started his legal career with the corporate firm O’Melveny & Myers in Los Angeles, but after about six months he discovered that corporate law was not a good fit. He resigned and then wrote the proposal that secured the initial federal funding for CRLA.

He is survived by his wife, Guadalupe Lucio, by his daughter, Shanna Lorenz, and son, Aaron Lorenz, children of his marriage in 1969 to Helene Shulman which ended in divorce, by his stepson and daughter-in-law, Luis and Tammy Lucio, by his son Jesse Kershner, and by his grandson James Lucio and granddaughter Ema Luz Julian-Lorenz.