Morris Dees, co-founder and chief trial attorney for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala., has been fighting against racism and injustice for more than four decades.

He founded the SPLC in 1971 with attorney Joseph J. Levin, Jr.; civil rights activist Julian Bond became the center’s first president. Early cases included integrating the Alabama State Troopers and desegregating the Montgomery YMCA. The SPLC, funded by donations from over 300,000 citizens across the nation, quickly grew into one of America’s most successful and innovative public interest law firms.

In 1980, the SPLC founded the Intelligence Project in response to resurgence in organized racist activity. The project monitors hate groups and develops legal strategies for protecting citizens from violence-prone groups. To promote acceptance and tolerance, the SPLC founded Teaching Tolerance in 1990. Over 80,000 schools use the project’s free videos and teaching materials, and over 400,000 teachers receive the award-winning Teaching Tolerance magazine. The SPLC has won two Oscars for its tolerance education films and received five Oscar nominations.

Known for his innovative lawsuits that crippled some of America’s most notorious white supremacist hate groups, Dees has received numerous awards connected to his work, including the American Bar Association’s ABA Medal, its highest medal, earlier this year. He was the subject of a made-for-television movie, “Line of Fire,” about his successful fight against the Ku Klux Klan, including a $7 million precedent-setting judgment against the United Klans of America on behalf of the mother of Michael Donald, an African American man lynched by the Klan in Mobile, Ala. A graduate of the University of Alabama School of Law, he is the author of three books including his autobiography, “A Lawyer’s Journey.”