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NEA honors Dr. Lenworth Alburn Gunther with human and civil rights award  
Annual gala also marks 50th anniversary of the NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards Dinner

BOSTON—Known as the “Godfather” to a generation of civil rights activists in New York and New Jersey, Dr. Lenworth Alburn Gunther received the NEA Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Award because of his lifelong racial social justice activism.

Since 1967, NEA has recognized and honored those who have fought — and continue to fight — for human and civil rights. This year, NEA honored the outstanding work of 12 American social justice heroes at its annual Human and Civil Rights Awards Dinner on Saturday, July 1, in Boston. The theme of the awards dinner is, “Living the Legacy: After 50 Years, Still We Rise.”

“Dr. Lenworth Alburn Gunther embodies the spirit of Dr. Maya Angelou’s beloved poem ‘Still I rise,’” said NEA President Lily Eskelsen García. “Through his deeds and actions, this human and civil rights hero is still rising and carrying the torch forward. Tonight, we renew our commitment to stand for racial and social justice and pledge to continue to shed a light on his work as he guides and inspires us all.”

Dr. Gunther’s strong sense of commitment to racial social justice grows out of his upbringing and the tumultuous struggles of the civil rights movement during the late sixties and early seventies. From a young age, Dr. Gunther experienced intense institutional racism; however, against the odds, Dr. Gunther became a Woodrow Wilson and Ford Foundation Doctoral Fellow, earning four degrees at Columbia University: a BA, an MA, a Master of Philosophy and a Ph. D. in American History and Russian History.

As a student at Columbia University, Dr. Gunther fought hard for racial equality. He advocated for a curriculum that mirrored the contributions of African American and other communities of color, the working poor and the cause of human and civil rights. Two years into his teaching career, he helped prepare Columbia University’s first African American studies curriculum. Since retiring from the classroom, Dr. Gunther has continued to mentor educators and young activists, working with police officers and young people to foster positive community relations. He created the “Gunther Group” which studies global domestic terrorism and gang activity and specializes in diversity and leadership training around the law enforcement issues. He used his expertise and extensive research to help police departments and advocacy groups in more than 1,000 communities.

Dr. Gunther upholds the belief that the process of change begins with individuals. And actions begin with personal awareness, compassion and undying empathy, and a willingness to stand alone, if necessary, in pursuit of educational excellence and opportunity for all students.

He pioneered African American Studies in the state’s public schools; since retiring from teaching, he’s mentored educators and police officers on diversity. Watch a video of Dr. Gunther in action. To view his full bio, please click here.
NEA also recognized the anniversary of its merger with the American Teachers Association, which represented black teachers in segregated schools. ATA originally created the Human and Civil Rights Awards Dinner, and, as part of the merger, NEA continues this important tradition 50 years later.

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The National Education Association is the nation’s largest professional employee organization, representing more than 3 million elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators, and students preparing to become teachers.