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Professor fought for social justice

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Although Letwin later backed away from the party, he spent the rest of his life fighting for social justice. In the courts, the longtime UCLA law professor helped win important cases involving the rights of criminal defendants and high school journalists. On campus he helped defend Angela Davis when she was under attack for her militant views.

He also spearheaded affirmative action in law school admissions, years before most public universities embraced diversity as a goal.

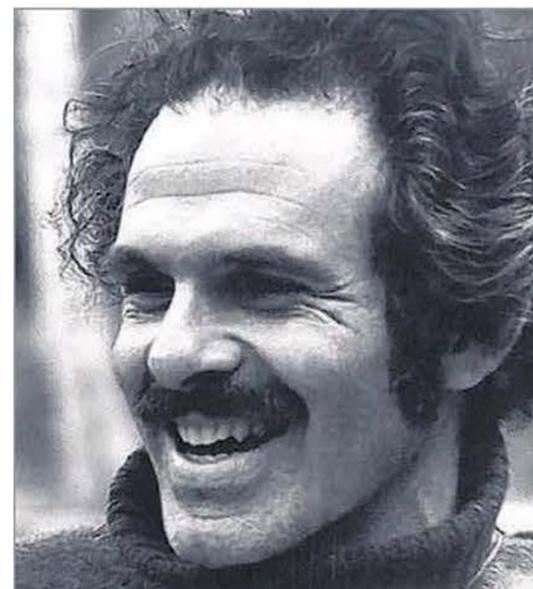
“He thought we should make a difference. Many of us weren’t sure about that,” Henry W. McGee Jr., a former long time UCLA law professor and one of the first African Americans to win tenure at the university, said of the activism that set Letwin apart from his colleagues.

Letwin, who died this summer at

the age of 85 in State College, Pa., after a long illness, joined UCLA in the early 1960s. With the civil rights movement heating up, he began to press the university to help prepare minority students for law school.

He became the founding director of the Legal Education Opportunity Program of Southern California, which sought to increase the enrollment of blacks and Mexican Americans at the law schools of UCLA, USC and Loyola. Letwin launched the program in the summer of 1968 with 40 students who took classes on criminal, constitutional and tort law and interacted with judges, police officers, prosecutors and other lawyers.

“It was truly a radical move,” said Los Angeles Deputy Dist. Atty. Miguel Espinoza, who is writing a book on the effort. “Within a year or two of his hiring, he laid the groundwork for one of the earliest and most expansive affirmative action programs in the nation.”



ACTIVIST AT UCLA Leon Letwin came to UCLA in the 1960s. As the civil rights movement heated up, he pressed the university to help prepare more minority students for law school. “He thought we should make a difference,” a colleague said.

In operation for a decade, the program exposed hundreds of students to the legal profession, includ-

ing Peter P. Espinoza, a 1980 UCLA law school graduate (and father of Miguel) who later served as supervising judge of Los Angeles County’s criminal courts.

“Leon’s a hero to me because of the impact he had on the law school and the legal profession in general,” Espinoza said in an interview last week.

At Letwin’s memorial service in late August following his July 13 death, Espinoza counted about 25 judges and a number of public officials who were admitted to law school after participating in the program, he said.

An expert on evidence law, Letwin also played a major role in *Pitchess vs. Superior Court*, a 1974 case that established the right of defendants accused of resisting arrest to obtain records relating to complaints of excessive force by a peace officer. The request for such information is now known as a Pitchess motion.

Letwin was born Dec. 29, 1929, in Milwaukee, where his parents, Bessie and Lazar, settled after fleeing anti-Semitic persecution during the Russian Revolution. As a youth, he subscribed to the Communist Party’s Sunday Worker newspaper, the act that drew the attention of the FBI.

At 15, Letwin entered the Univer-

sity of Chicago. He was interested in studying the brain but changed course as the McCarthy-era hunt for Communists and other subversives commenced.

“There was a dearth of lawyers defending people who came under McCarthy’s attacks,” Alita Letwin, his wife of 63 years, recalled Monday. “That was the major reason Leon went into law. He felt it was a duty.”

He went on to law school at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, graduating in 1952 near the top of his class. With his wife, whom he married that year, he was active in the Communist Party-controlled Labor Youth League. They left the group in 1957, after learning about the brutalities of the Stalin regime in the Soviet Union.

Letwin spent a few years in private practice in Milwaukee, leaving in 1964 to teach at UCLA. He quickly leaped into a number of controversial fights, including defending Davis, a philosophy professor, Communist and member of the Black Panther Party, when Republican Gov. Ronald Reagan advocated her dismissal. Letwin argued in a letter to university officials that firing a faculty member with “divergent views” would make a mockery of academic integrity. With colleague Richard Wasserstrom, he also helped strike

down a loyalty oath requirement. Davis was fired in 1970.

A few years later Letwin was one of three attorneys who represented leaders of the Red Tide, a student underground paper, in a case that ultimately went to the state Supreme Court.

Founded in the Letwins’ garage in West Los Angeles by a group of students from nearby University High School, the paper featured radical views on the Vietnam War, abortion and other issues. School authorities barred its distribution on campus, alleging that one of its articles libeled a district employee. In 1976, the court agreed with the students that the school’s efforts to ban the paper amounted to prior censorship.

One of the paper’s leaders was Letwin’s son, Michael, now a public defender in New York.

“The idea we grew up with was you should stand up for what you believe in,” Michael Letwin said. “He would do battle for us with school administration.... That made a huge difference to us.”

Besides his wife and son Michael, Letwin, who retired from UCLA in 1994, is also survived by sons Daniel and David, and five grandchildren.