



State of Tennessee

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 35

By Representatives Hardaway, Cooper, Faison

and

Senators Akbari, Kyle, Robinson

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of Dr. Miriam Dolores DeCosta-Willis of Memphis.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly were greatly saddened to learn of the passing of Dr. Miriam Dolores DeCosta-Willis of Memphis, an esteemed community activist and an acclaimed and internationally renowned scholar, educator, and author whose life was defined by her passion for learning and her commitment to equality; and

WHEREAS, an activist throughout her life, she organized a student protest at Wilkinson High School, joined her mother in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and was jailed in Memphis for participating in civil rights demonstrations; and

WHEREAS, Dr. DeCosta-Willis served as advisor to the Black Students Association, campaigned for Black political candidates, served as chair of the Memphis NAACP's Education Committee, led a boycott of local public schools in the 1960s, and joined protest marches in Washington in the 1990s; and

WHEREAS, born into an African-American family of educators on November 1, 1934, in Florence, Alabama, Miriam Dolores DeCosta-Willis was the daughter of Beautine Hubert DeCosta and Frank A. DeCosta and a descendant of slaves; she grew up with her brother, Frank, on college campuses and attended public and private laboratory schools in Georgia, Alabama, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina; and

WHEREAS, in 1950, Miriam DeCosta-Willis became the first African-American student to be admitted to Westover School, a preparatory school in Middlebury, Connecticut. In 1952, she entered Wellesley College, where she was awarded Freshman Honors, named a Wellesley College Scholar, and inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa Society; and

WHEREAS, she received her Master of Arts degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1960, and she was one of the first Black students to be awarded a doctorate from the university in 1967, receiving a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Romance Languages; and

WHEREAS, after completing her junior year of college, Miriam DeCosta-Willis married Russell B. Sugarmon and relocated to Memphis with him; their union produced four children, Tarik, Elena, Erika, and Monique; and

WHEREAS, Dr. DeCosta-Willis and her children relocated to Washington, D.C., in 1970, where, in 1972, she married Archie W. Willis, Jr., a Memphis attorney, businessman, and former state legislator; she moved back to Memphis in 1976 but returned to Washington after her husband's death in 1988; and

WHEREAS, Miriam DeCosta-Willis was a college professor and administrator for more than forty years, beginning in 1957 when she became an instructor of French at LeMoyne College. After completing her graduate degree, she taught French and English at Owen Junior College; and

WHEREAS, in 1966, Dr. DeCosta-Willis became the first African-American faculty member at the University of Memphis, as assistant professor and, later, associate professor of Spanish. It was an especially gratifying achievement because Memphis State University had rejected her application for graduate school in the late 1950s because, although she was highly qualified, she was Black; and

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WHEREAS, Dr. DeCosta-Willis was one of two African-American women who were denied admission to then-Memphis State University in 1957-1958; in September 1959, a group of students, known as the "Memphis State Eight," broke down racial barriers and integrated Memphis State University, now known as the University of Memphis. Luther McClellan, Marvis Kneeland Jones, Sammie Burnett Johnson, Ralph Prater, Eleanor Gandy, Rose Blakney Love, Bertha Rogers Looney, and John Simpson were only allowed on campus until noon and were restricted from the cafeteria and student center; despite fear and uncertainty, they persevered to receive their education, paving the way for more African-American students to enroll and faculty members to follow; and

WHEREAS, Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis joined the faculty of Howard University in 1970 and was elected chair of the Department of Romance Languages four years later. From 1979 to 1989, she served as professor of Romance Languages at LeMoyne-Owen College, where she founded and directed the Du Bois Scholars Program; and

WHEREAS, in 1989, she was appointed Commonwealth Professor of Spanish at George Mason University in Virginia and, two years later, became a professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, from which she retired in 1999; and

WHEREAS, research in African, Caribbean, African-American, Afro-Hispanic, and Latin American literature and culture, as well as Black Memphis history, informed the teaching and scholarship of Dr. DeCosta-Willis. She published thirty-six articles and eighteen reviews in scholarly journals, authored seventeen book chapters, and presented seventy papers at conferences, seminars, and symposia; and

WHEREAS, she also authored, edited, or co-edited fifteen books, including *Blacks in Hispanic Literature: A Collection of Critical Essays*, *Erotique Noire/Black Erotica*, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*, *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers*, *Notable Black Memphians*, and *Black Memphis Landmarks*; and

WHEREAS, her scholarship was funded through grants from the United Negro College Fund, the Tennessee Humanities Council, and the National Endowment for the Humanities; her research took her to more than fifty countries, including Cuba, Guyana, Haiti, Ghana, Spain, and the Dominican Republic; and

WHEREAS, she was a member of the College Language Association and the Association of Caribbean Studies and a former associate editor of *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal of Black Women* and the *Afro-Hispanic Review*; and

WHEREAS, the co-founder and chair of the Memphis Black Writers' Workshop, for which she organized a number of symposia, Miriam DeCosta-Willis co-edited *Homespun Images: An Anthology of Black Memphis Writers and Artists* and coordinated a Black History series for WHBQ-TV Channel 13 in Memphis; and

WHEREAS, no stranger to awards and accolades, Dr. DeCosta-Willis received several fellowships and honors, including a Johns Hopkins Fellowship, the Wellesley College Fellowship for Graduate Study, the Outstanding Faculty Member of the Year Award at LeMoyne-Owen College, the Prominent Black Woman Award at the University of Memphis, and the Torchbearer of Afro-Hispanic Studies from the College Language Association; and

WHEREAS, she was listed in the *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who of Women*, *Leaders of Black America*, *International Authors and Writers Who's Who*, *Dictionary of International Biography*, and four other national/international directories; and

WHEREAS, a life member of the NAACP, Dr. DeCosta-Willis was a former chair of the Tennessee Humanities Council and former board member of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, the Shelby County Historical Commission, and the Memphis State University Center for Research on Women; and

WHEREAS, Dr. Miriam DeCosta-Willis is survived by her four children, Tarik, Elena, Erika, and Monique; her eight grandchildren; and her seven great-grandchildren; and

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WHEREAS, Dr. DeCosta-Willis leaves behind an indelible legacy of integrity and probity in public life, compassion and loyalty in private life, and diligence and dedication in all her chosen endeavors; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting that the members of this General Assembly should remember the bountiful life of this exceptional community leader and human being; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of Dr. Miriam Dolores DeCosta-Willis, reflecting fondly upon her impeccable character and her stalwart commitment to living the examined life with courage and conviction.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we express our sympathy and offer our condolences to the family of Dr. DeCosta-Willis.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy and upon proper request made to the appropriate clerk, the language appearing immediately following the State seal appear without House or Senate designation.

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ADOPTED: January 15, 2021



CAMERON SEXTON, SPEAKER
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



RANDY MCNALLY
SPEAKER OF THE SENATE

APPROVED this 22nd day of January 2021



BILL LEE, GOVERNOR