MISSISSIPPI LEGISLATURE REGULAR SESSION 2021

By: Representative Reynolds To: Rules

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 40

A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION MOURNING THE LOSS AND HONORING THE LIFE, LEGACY AND SERVICE OF WILLIAM FORREST WINTER, FORMER GOVERNOR OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI, AND EXPRESSING GREAT SYMPATHY TO HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS UPON HIS PASSING.

WHEREAS, it is written in Ecclesiastes 3:1 that "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the Heaven," and as such, on December 18, 2020, the immaculate author and finisher of our soul's destiny summoned the mortal presence of dearly beloved, former Governor William Forrest Winter, the 58th governor of the State of Mississippi, to eternal rest, rendering great sorrow and loss to his family, friends and to the great Magnolia State; and

WHEREAS, Governor Winter was born on February 21, 1923, in Grenada, Mississippi, and was raised on a farm owned by his father, Mr. William Aylmer Winter, who served three terms in the Mississippi House of Representatives and three terms in the Mississippi Senate, and his mother, Mrs. Inez Parker Winter, a devoted Grenada County schoolteacher; and

WHEREAS, after graduating from Ole Miss in 1943, Governor Winter entered the United States Army as an officer, and though he dreamed of a combat role, he instead found himself training a segregated African-American regiment in northeast Alabama, and while there, as part of an experiment in integration, he worked alongside African-American officers, whose talk about civil rights and political progress greatly inspired him to push for change back home; and

WHEREAS, after the war, Governor Winter joined a wave of young veterans who returned to the South, and were committed to ending the political status quo, and he was one of twelve law students at Ole Miss to run for public office in 1947, and one of the eleven law students who won their respective elections; and

WHEREAS, in 1947, Governor Winter was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives while still a law student at Ole Miss, and in a bid for progressive reforms, in 1956, he ran for Speaker of the House against the long-serving and powerful House Speaker Walter Sillers, and though the bid was unsuccessful, it nonetheless solidified his reputation as a courageous advocate of political, economic and educational reforms; and

WHEREAS, in 1956, Governor Winter was appointed State Tax Collector by Governor J.P. Coleman, and was responsible for collecting the state's black-market tax on whiskey and liquor at a time when alcohol sales in the state were outlawed, and in that position, he was the second highest paid officeholder in the

nation, right behind the President of the United States, and as a good government initiative, he successfully advocated to abolish the position of State Tax Collector, which the Legislature did in 1964, and he went on to be elected as State Treasurer in 1964, and served in that position for one term until 1968; and

WHEREAS, in 1967, Governor Winter ran for governor for the first time, and after leading in the first primary, his life was threatened by the Ku Klux Klan because of his open-mindedness on race, as he stood in staunch opposition to the Klan and the White Citizens Councils, which were organizations that advocated for strict racial segregation through violent means, and though he persisted with the campaign despite death threats, he was ultimately defeated in the second primary by John Bell Williams, who was elected as governor; and

WHEREAS, after spending a few years practicing law after his tenure as State Treasurer, Governor Winter was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1971, continuing his advocacy of education enhancement and job creation, and in 1975, he ran a second time for governor, but was unsuccessful against Governor Cliff Finch, whose campaign was high on populism and full of theatrics; and

WHEREAS, with great perseverance, Governor Winter ran for governor once again in 1979, this time successfully, with his slogan being, "William Winter for Governor: The Toughest Job in Mississippi," which foretold the tough, complex battles he faced

in dealing with the Mississippi Legislature on his signature education reforms; and

WHEREAS, at the time, Mississippi's governors were limited to a single term, and Governor Winter was determined to make the most of his time in that honorable position by helping the State of Mississippi become a better place for its youth, as he linked education with economic development, observing that, "The road out of the poor house runs past the school house"; and

WHEREAS, when Governor Winter took office, Mississippi was the only state in the nation without compulsory school attendance and was one of only two states without a statewide system of kindergartens, things that would change under his leadership as he worked towards a brighter future for the Magnolia State; and

WHEREAS, however, Governor Winter initially found legislative progress as elusive as electoral success, failing in his first two attempts at getting an education reform bill passed, but after his second try, in 1982, he and his aides doubled down, beefing up the bill with additional measures like depoliticizing the State Board of Education and raising teacher standards, and he called for a special session that winter, with education as the only item on the agenda; and

WHEREAS, as he was faced with intense opposition in the Legislature, Governor Winter took to the road with his wife, Elise, and his aides, and held nine enormous rallies around the state, where he delivered 82 speeches supporting the bill that

were covered by the state's largest newspaper, *The Clarion-Ledger*, which won a Pulitzer Prize for its efforts; and

WHEREAS, by December of that year, when the Legislature finally assembled to vote, public opinion had swung hard in Governor Winter's favor and the Education Reform Act passed overwhelmingly in the House, and by a single vote in the Senate, on December 20, 1982, with the press calling it "the Christmas miracle"; and

WHEREAS, the Education Reform Act is considered the most significant educational legislation enacted in Mississippi since the establishment of its public school system in 1870, and most importantly, a public kindergarten is the cornerstone of that law, which has been heralded throughout the nation as a model of progressive educational legislation; and

WHEREAS, Governor Winter's achievement rippled out and was a catalyst for reforms by many other Southern states who secured passage of their own education reforms, with the nationally syndicated columnist Carl Rowan characterizing his Education Reform Act as "the most important civil rights and economic development legislation of 1982"; and

WHEREAS, outstandingly, Governor Winter's administration was marked by an efficiency and a lack of controversy rarely seen in Mississippi politics, and to highlight the cultural accomplishments of Mississippi, he and his wife, Elise, set a new tone for state leadership by launching a series of conversations

at the Governor's Mansion featuring prominent and accomplished Mississippians, including Shelby Foote, Eudora Welty, Leontyne Price, Willie Morris, Walker Percy, Margaret Walker Alexander, Myrlie Evers-Williams, the widow of the slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, and many other literary, musical and scientific luminaries, and after a performance by opera singer Leontyne Price at the Governor's Mansion, he renamed the Bilbo Room at the Mansion the Leontyne Price Room, a testament to the advances in racial harmony and inclusiveness fostered by Governor Winter; and

WHEREAS, as noted by political scientist Jess White, "Winter had a whole other career after serving as governor, principally in the arena of racial reconciliation," and after being appointed by President Bill Clinton to serve on the National Commission on Race, Governor Winter expanded that work for racial harmony with the creation of the Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation in 1999; and

WHEREAS, as further evidence of his dedication to civil rights and equality, Governor Winter was an early and longtime advocate of changing Mississippi's state flag to rid it of the Confederate battle emblem, and he and Tupelo businessman Jack Reed headed an effort to change the flag through a statewide referendum in 2001, and although unsuccessful, this effort led to renewed focus on changing the flag, which was finally accomplished in 2020, by action of the Mississippi Legislature, and he was truly

proud and delighted to see the flag changed during his lifetime; and

WHEREAS, Governor Winter's political courage was further recognized on the national stage when he received the John F. Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award in 2008, with presidential adviser Vernon Jordan eloquently commenting that "Governor Winter exhibited courage throughout his career, a willingness to speak out, to stand up, to be daring"; and

WHEREAS, a passionate student of history and government, Governor Winter served on the board of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History for 50 years and as board chairman for over 30 years, and because of his admirable public service, the William F. Winter Archives and History Building was dedicated in his honor on November 7, 2003, and the Center for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi is also named in his honor; and

WHEREAS, as a visionary leader and public servant, Governor Winter was the leading force behind the opening of the Museum of Mississippi History and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, and his goal was for every Mississippi student to visit these museums at least once, and over the last years of his life, he helped raise funds to endow field trips to both museums for schools with limited resources, and with his help, the Foundation for Mississippi History raised a significant portion of the $4,000,000.00 endowment to make this possible; and

WHEREAS, the William Winter Professorship of History, an endowed professorship in the University of Mississippi history department, was established to honor Governor Winter as one of the university's most distinguished alumni, and in 1996, the Mississippi Historical Society presented him with the society's prestigious Dunbar Rowland Award for his lifelong dedication to the study and preservation of Mississippi history; and

WHEREAS, in addition to his political career, Governor Winter was active in academics and other areas of public service as trustee of Belhaven College and Columbia Seminary, president of both the Mississippi Historical Society and the University of Mississippi Alumni Association, and serving in distinguished positions in state and national mental health advocacy organizations, and he further held the Jamie L. Whitten Chair of Law and Government in the University of Mississippi Law School in the fall semester of 1989; and

WHEREAS, the State of Mississippi will forever treasure Governor Winter, who lived his life with a passion and purpose to improve the quality of life for all Mississippians, and he will be remembered for his progressive vision and his impeccable character as much as for his numerous accomplishments; and

WHEREAS, though he has traversed the river of life to reunite with those who answered God's summons to life eternal and now beckon his arrival to the celestial shores of Heaven's grandeur, the legacy of Governor Winter's indelible imprint upon our lives

will continue to refresh the hearts and fond memories of his loved ones, including his wife of 70 years, Mrs. Elise Varner Winter; three devoted daughters, Anne Winter, Lele Gillespie and Eleanor Winter; five grandchildren, Dr. Winter Williams, Dr. Zach Williams, Ty Gillespie, Caroline Gillespie and Grace Gillespie; five great-grandchildren; and a host of other relatives and dear friends; and

WHEREAS, Governor Winter's extraordinary devotion to his family and to the State of Mississippi will always be remembered, and precious memories of time spent with him will hopefully continue to provide warmth, peace and comfort to his loved ones; and

WHEREAS, Governor Winter will forever be loved, cherished and missed by all who knew him, and since it is written in 2 Corinthians 5:8, that to be "absent from the body is to be present with the Lord," his family and friends can find peace and comfort during this difficult time; and

WHEREAS, it is the policy of this Legislature to honor and commend the lives of outstanding Mississippi leaders, especially those such as Governor William Forrest Winter, whose unparalleled public service, dauntless fortitude and remarkable dedication to equality for all, bring honor to the great State of Mississippi:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI, THE SENATE CONCURRING THEREIN, That we do hereby mourn the loss and commemorate the life

and legacy of Governor William Forrest Winter, and express sincere and deepest sympathy to his family and friends upon his passing.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That copies of this resolution be furnished to the family of Governor William Forrest Winter and to the members of the Capitol Press Corps.