

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 135

By Ragan

A RESOLUTION to honor the eighty-five students who integrated Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School in 1955.

WHEREAS, on May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court issued its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, declaring segregation in public schools to be illegal; and

WHEREAS, this ruling came at a time when state laws throughout the South made it illegal to teach racially mixed classes; and

WHEREAS, on January 11, 1955, Superintendent Bertis E. Capeheart announced that Oak Ridge public schools had been ordered by the Atomic Energy Commission (now the U.S. Department of Energy), which owned and managed schools in Oak Ridge at the time, to desegregate the following September; and

WHEREAS, on September 6, 1955, eighty-five African-American students entered the previously segregated Robertsville Junior High School and Oak Ridge High School; these intrepid souls thus became the first African-American students to desegregate a public school system in the South; and

WHEREAS, though they were making history, their welcome was not a warm one; these students endured racial epithets, both spoken and written on the school buildings, as well as additional hate speech, physical violence, and a host of other untold indignities; and

WHEREAS, they were mentored prior to integration by parents, teachers, staff, and ministers of Scarboro Community Church, but nothing could fully prepare these students for what they would face as young, involuntary heroes of the Civil Rights movement; and

WHEREAS, the Oak Ridge 85, as they are known, included Earnestine Avery, Donald Avery, Willie Lee Avery, Richard Bates, Robert Berry, Will C. Booker, Stella Brantley, Marshall

Butler, Jacqueline Bynam, William Henry Carroll, Pete Clark, Randolph Collins, Evidies Copeland, Ethel Davidson, Minnie Davidson, Lola B. Dowdell, Georgia Lee Dowdell, James Drake, Willie Lee Edwards, Shirley Reed Freeman, John D. Ghosten, Jr., L.C. Gipson, Nannie Mae Goodman, Lawrence Graham, Mazie Graham, Rufus Graham, Fred Guinn, Gwendolyn Guinn, Margaret Strickland Guinn, Eugene Hawkins, Roberta Hawkins, Shirley Hawkins, Helen Hill, Mable Jean Hill, Robert Hill, Deloris Holmes, Edward Holmes, Dorothy Ann Hudgens, A.C. Hunter, Jr., Webster Jackson, Leroy Justice, Willie Frank Kirk, Archie Lee, Jo Ann Lee, Charles Lewis, Dorothy Kirk Lewis, Jimmy Lewis, Spencer Lindsay, Earnestine Maddox, Bernice Mahone, Leon Mahone, Mary Ellen Mahone, Winfred Malone, Barbara Jean Mason, Emma McCaskill, Paul Dylene McCaskill, Jesse McClanahan, Alma McKinney, Eloise Mitchell, Maxine Officer, Barbara Sue Perry, Bobby Phillips, Amos William Robinson, Arthur Charles Robinson, Hazel Marie Robinson, C.H. Shannon, Mary Jo Shannon, Barbara Jean Sims, Willy Smith, Sarah Mae Spratling, Emma Jean Strickland, Pearl Strickland, Frank Summerville, Joe Summerville, Edward Lewis Threat, Joe Torry, Charles Walker, Estelle Warmley, Donald Washington, Joe West, Jr., Roy Lee White, Leroy Williams, and Nehemiah Williams; and

WHEREAS, the Oak Ridge school employees involved in the 1955 desegregation include Fred Brown, Douglas Freeman, Hurley Hardin, Ms. McSwain, Mrs. Roach, Madeline Scales, and Mrs. Vernon; and

WHEREAS, these courageous trailblazers planted the seeds of diversity that persist to this day, so that all children of Oak Ridge are guaranteed the right to high-quality public school education regardless of race, ethnic background, religion, gender, socioeconomic class, or citizenship; and

WHEREAS, it is most fitting that we honor the Oak Ridge 85 at this time; 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 join with the town of Oak Ridge in commemorating September 6, 2021, as Oak Ridge-85 Students Day, celebrating the 1955 desegregation of Oak Ridge public schools, a historic and important event in the fight for civil rights, extending our sincere gratitude to those eighty-five students who integrated Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High School.

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.