

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 800

By Kyle

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of Anna Belle Clement O'Brien, the First Lady of Tennessee Politics.

WHEREAS, "a glooming peace this morning with it brings / the sun for sorrow will not show his head"; such was that rainy morning in early September which arrived with the mournful news that the First Lady of Tennessee Politics, Anna Belle Clement O'Brien, had passed in the night; and

WHEREAS, known to countless Tennesseans simply as "Miss Anna Belle," the gracious and charming lady from Cumberland County truly believed that "politics" is a beautiful word and spent her lifetime working diligently to improve the lives of her fellow citizens, becoming a champion in the political arena for children and public education, patients' rights and quality healthcare, and the mentally and physically challenged; and

WHEREAS, born in Scottsville, Kentucky, Anna Belle was the daughter of Robert and Maybelle Goad Clement, and grew up in Dickson, Tennessee, where she held her first job in the office of her father's law firm as a secretary on Saturdays and was introduced at an early age to the impact of the law on the lives of individuals; and

WHEREAS, the citizens of Tennessee first became acquainted with Miss Anna Belle as a campaign operative during her brother, Frank Goad Clement's, successful gubernatorial election in 1952, which advanced the Clement family political tree to the next generation, following in the footsteps of their father, Robert S. Clement, who had served as mayor of Dickson, and their grandfather, James A. Clement, who served in the Senate of the 50th General Assembly, 1897-1899, and later the 58th and 59th General Assemblies, 1913-1917; and

WHEREAS, Miss Anna Belle started her public service career in 1955 as an assistant to future Governor Buford Ellington, who was then serving as Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture under Governor Clement; and

WHEREAS, in 1959, upon the election of Buford Ellington to the office of governor she served as his executive assistant, and in 1962, after the reelection of Frank Clement as governor, she became her brother's first appointment as he named her his administrative assistant, making her the first female chief of staff to the Governor in Tennessee history; and

WHEREAS, Miss Anna Belle was instrumental in the outstanding achievements and legacy of the Clement administration: free textbooks for Tennessee's school children; healthcare for the poor; the creation of programs for our youth; and humane treatment and care of the mentally ill and equality for all people; and

WHEREAS, Miss Anna Belle was fond of saying "politics got me a good husband"; she left public service in 1966 upon her marriage to Charles O'Brien of Memphis. He also had a distinguished career in public service, first as a member of the House of Representatives of the 83rd General Assembly, 1963-1964, and the Senate of the 84th General Assembly, 1965-1966; and

WHEREAS, with the loving support of his devoted wife, the Honorable Charles H. O'Brien won the first of his three elections to the Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals in 1970 and was appointed to the Tennessee Supreme Court by Governor Ned McWherter in 1987, rising to the post of Chief Justice before taking a well-deserved retirement from the bench in 1994; and

WHEREAS, in 1974, having relocated with Judge O'Brien to Cumberland County at Lake Tansi, Miss Anna Belle felt a strong desire to return to public service to help the handicapped children of Tennessee and set her sights on running for the General Assembly; and

WHEREAS, using her campaign slogan of "About our district, she will tell, Let's elect Miss Anna Belle!" she ran for and won election in 1974 to the House of Representatives of the 89th Tennessee General Assembly on a platform of better education, improving rural roads, addressing mental healthcare needs, and helping the handicapped; and

WHEREAS, in 1977, Miss Anna Belle returned to Nashville as a State Senator, winning the seat for the 12th Senatorial District for the first of her five terms in office. She would serve twenty years in the Senate as a member of the 90th, 91st, 92nd, 93rd, 94th, 95th, 96th, 97th, 98th, and 99th General Assemblies from 1977 to 1997; and

WHEREAS, in the Senate, Miss Anna Belle quickly won a well-deserved reputation as a thoughtful and dedicated legislator who worked hard for her constituents and matters important to her district, pursuing legislation that provided more funding for children and schools, aid to the physically and mentally challenged, and road improvements for the Upper Cumberland; and

WHEREAS, Miss Anna Belle was loyal to her district and loyal to her friends, often saying that "if you're my friend, you're my friend" as she never waived in her support of causes or legislation, regardless of popularity, when taking a steadfast stand for what she believed to be the right thing; and

WHEREAS, mindful of how far the State of Tennessee had come, Miss Anna Belle, in moments of heated debate, frayed nerves and high emotions, would seek recognition on the Senate floor to speak calming words that rang of conviction and necessity - to do the right thing, to remember the less fortunate, to be fair and to remind us in our prosperity that it has not always been so with Tennessee; and

WHEREAS, suffering her own personal battle with breast cancer, Miss Anna Belle led the effort to pass legislation to mandate insurance coverage for mammograms and was the sponsor of the landmark Tennessee Living Will Law; and

WHEREAS, the longest-serving female member of the Senate in Tennessee history, Senator O'Brien was the first woman to chair a standing committee of the General Assembly when she was named chair of the Senate Transportation Committee for the 91st General Assembly and achieved great acclaim as chair of the Senate Education Committee; and

WHEREAS, as the lone female member of the Senate for many years, Miss Anna Belle was an inspiration to women across Tennessee, leading by example as she mentored and supported many other women who sought political office and careers in public service; and

WHEREAS, in 1982, the Senate Democratic Caucus turned to her when seeking a worthy opponent to challenge the Governor then in office; she sought the Democratic

nomination for governor and blazed the trail for many women in Tennessee to run for higher office; and

WHEREAS, while running for Governor she simultaneously chaired the Tennessee Comprehensive Education Study, the first serious examination of public education in this state since the 1950s, from which came the education reform movement that was otherwise known as the “Better Schools Program”; and

WHEREAS, during her service on the Senate Education Committee and as chair of the Select Oversight Committee on Education, she helped oversee the most comprehensive and dynamic reform of classroom education in the history of Tennessee with the enactment of the Education Improvement Act and the creation of the Basic Education Program funding formula; and

WHEREAS, following the advice of her beloved mother, Mrs. Maybelle Clement, who always told her daughter to be a Baptist and be a good Democrat, Senator O’Brien obeyed and in 1994, became the first woman to serve as chair of the Senate Democratic Caucus; and

WHEREAS, during her lifetime, Anna Belle O’Brien campaigned tirelessly for Democratic candidates in Tennessee from Memphis to Mountain City, delivering every speech with the same inspirational verve and charm that endeared her to every crowd she addressed and swayed many a voter to her cause; and

WHEREAS, by committing her life to public service, Miss Anna Belle did not yield to the temptation to let someone else perform the job, or to remain aloof from what in a free society is everyone’s business; she welcomed the challenge and the opportunity and pledged her best effort in service to others; and

WHEREAS, a woman of deep and abiding faith, Anna Belle Clement O’Brien, with her husband, Judge O’Brien, were founders and faithful members of Lake Tansi Community Church, working closely with its pastor to build the small church into a tremendous congregation; and

WHEREAS, preceded in death by her beloved husband, the Honorable Charles H. O’Brien, former Chief Justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court, Miss Anna Belle is survived by her sister Emma Gene Peery; stepchildren and their spouses: Heather O’Brien Hahn and

husband Jan, and Diane O'Brien Soloman and husband David; nieces and nephews: Bob Clement and wife Mary, Frank Clement, Jr., and wife Lynn, B.Y. Peery and wife Deborah, Ann Whitis and husband Warren, Sara Kyle and husband Jim, Robert Peery and wife Carrie, and Betty Belle Peery; numerous grandchildren, great nieces and nephews, and a host of many, many dear and loyal friends; and

WHEREAS, Miss Anna Belle often quoted her favorite poem:

Isn't it strange that kings and queens,
and clowns that caper in sawdust rings,
and average folks like you and me,
are builders of eternity?
Each is given a kit of tools,
a shapeless mass and a set of rules.
And each must make ere time is flown,
a stumbling block or a stepping-stone; and

WHEREAS, the tireless Senator O'Brien lived her life as a builder of eternity, and with her list of rules and bag of tools, she built her stepping stones across the State of Tennessee, for which we owe her a debt of gratitude and thanks for the memories; and

WHEREAS, a woman of courage and accomplishment, the beautiful Miss Anna Belle truly embodied the Volunteer spirit of Tennessee, and it is fitting that this General Assembly should pause to remember the extraordinary life of Anna Belle Clement O'Brien; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED SIXTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of our friend and former colleague, Anna Belle Clement O'Brien, reflecting fondly upon her resolute character, her unrivaled years of service to the good people of Tennessee, 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 Anna Belle Clement O'Brien.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation to the family of Anna Belle Clement O'Brien, with this final clause omitted from such copy.