

SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 88

BY SENATOR CLAITOR

A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

To commend, posthumously, John P. Nelson Jr. for his contributions to civil rights in Louisiana.

WHEREAS, John Pettit Nelson Jr., who died in 2006, was a New Orleans attorney who worked on various landmark civil rights cases; and

WHEREAS, John Pettit Nelson Jr. was one of five children born to John Pettit Nelson of St. Louis, Missouri, and Stella Foret of Lafouche Parish, Louisiana, in 1921; and

WHEREAS, a native of Gulfport, Mississippi, John Nelson grew up in New Orleans and attended Louisiana State University for three years, then receiving his B.S. and L.L.B. degrees from Loyola University; and

WHEREAS, while a junior at LSU, he volunteered for active service in the United States Army in 1940, entering as a private and being discharged with the rank of captain, serving in the South Pacific and the Philippines during World War II, and earning the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart; and

WHEREAS, John Nelson was admitted to practice law in Louisiana in 1950, joined the law firm of Dodd, Hirsch and Barker, and in 1954, became the Assistant District Attorney for Orleans Parish, a position which he left in 1958 to become a senior partner in the law firm of Nelson, Ormond and Nelson; and

WHEREAS, in a landmark civil rights case, Nelson represented the defendants in the case of *Lombard v. Louisiana* (subsequently *Louisiana v. Goldfinch, et al.*) a sit-in case that occurred in Orleans Parish where demonstrators had been sentenced in state court to ten-year jail terms for "criminal anarchy", a matter which he handled through all of Louisiana's courts and argued before the United States Supreme Court with the ultimate decision in favor of the defendants; and

WHEREAS, this was the first time a white attorney in the South, unaffiliated with any civil rights organization, had represented an African American in a civil rights case before the United States Supreme Court; and

WHEREAS, John Nelson also handled the suit to integrate Tulane University, initially losing the suit after getting an earlier favorable judgment, when a second judge rendered a negative decision but prompting Tulane to voluntarily desegregate; and

WHEREAS, he served as counsel for St. Augustine High School of New Orleans, a de facto racially segregated black school, in its efforts to integrate interscholastic athletic activities overseen by the Louisiana High School Athletic Association and he also represented the Houma Indians of Terrebonne Parish, where a tri-racial pattern of segregation existed and was successful in obtaining a federal court injunction and plan for integration of the schools; and

WHEREAS, in 1960, Nelson was one of the organizers of the Save Our Schools (SOS) movement in Louisiana, which organized resistance to the efforts to close public schools in order to prevent integration; SOS carried on a widespread program of education and a "car-lift" for children wishing to attend boycotted schools; with two other SOS attorneys Nelson submitted an amicus brief in the St. Helena School closing case, heard before the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana; he was also a trustee of the Back to School Fund that assisted parents who lost employment because they sent their children to integrated schools; and Nelson won a favorable suit brought against the New Orleans Athletic Club by Thomas P. Perkins Jr., a young African American Harvard student from New Orleans, who when home from university, was denied entrance and use of the facilities even though Perkins was a member of the Harvard Club of Boston, which had a reciprocal agreement with the athletic club; and

WHEREAS, Nelson was a founding member of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, and later served as vice chairman on its legal committee; he also served as a member of the board of directors of the Louisiana Council on Human Relations and a member of the Louisiana Advisory Committee to the United States Civil Rights Commission; and

WHEREAS, John P. Nelson Jr. donated to the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, a collection of his papers which consist of 7.2 linear feet of materials arranged into three series of materials related to integration in New Orleans and within the state of Louisiana, General Materials (1957-1967), Public Service Organizations (1969-1973), and

Legal Cases (1960-1977); and

WHEREAS, the papers document Nelson's active participation in the civil rights movement, school integration in New Orleans, and his work as an Assistant District Attorney for Orleans Parish and includes 1,227 pieces of correspondence dated between 1957 and 1977; and

WHEREAS, the papers also include magazine articles, speeches, a proposal, collected materials, notes, memoranda, agendas, reports, minutes, job descriptions, applications, resumes, forms, and various legal documents; and

WHEREAS, John P. Nelson Jr. was a progressive voice for Louisiana, a well-known, highly respected, admired attorney, and citizen of Louisiana who left an indelible mark upon the lives of all those who knew him; and

WHEREAS, the success of the state of Louisiana, the strength of our communities, and the overall vitality of American society depend, in great measure, upon people like John P. Nelson Jr.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Legislature of Louisiana does hereby commend, posthumously, John P. Nelson Jr. for his contributions to civil rights in Louisiana.

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PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE

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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES