House Concurrent Resolution 32

Sponsored by Representative DEXTER, Senator LIEBER; Senators CAMPOS, FREDERICK, GELSER BLOUIN, SOLLMAN, TAYLOR

SUMMARY

The following summary is not prepared by the sponsors of the measure and is not a part of the body thereof subject to consideration by the Legislative Assembly. It is an editor's brief statement of the essential features of the measure **as introduced.**

In memoriam: Walter Willard Cole Sr. (aka Darcelle XV), 1930-2023.

CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

Whereas Walter Willard Cole Sr. was born on November 16, 1930, and grew up in the Linnton neighborhood of Portland, Oregon; and

Whereas Walter Cole's mother died when he was very young, and he was a shy, quiet boy who felt isolated from other children, who often taunted him as a "four-eyed sissyboy"; and

Whereas in 1951, Walter Cole married his high school sweetheart, Jeanette Rossini, and they had two children, Walter Jr. and Maridee; and

Whereas during the 1950s, Walter Cole served in the United States Army, managed a retail store and owned a coffee shop, trying to live what he later recalled as a conventional all-American life; and

Whereas Walter Cole began acting in local theater, and he met and fell in love with Roxy LeRoy Neuhardt, a former Las Vegas dancer and nightclub performer whom Cole described as the love of his life; and

Whereas in 1967, Walter Cole purchased the run-down Demas Tavern in Portland's Old Town, never imagining that it would grow from those humble beginnings into a business that would last for half a century and become a venerable Portland institution that has attracted visitors from all over the world; and

Whereas to bring tensions under control at the gritty and often tumultuous tavern, Walter Cole started staging light-hearted cabaret shows on a banquet table in the back of the bar, but the customers didn't pay much attention until he started wearing a dress; and

Whereas Walter Cole was 37 the first time he performed in drag, wearing a flamenco-style dress with a tall black wig; and

Whereas working closely with Neuhardt, Walter Cole made the drag performances the focus of the business, which soon resulted in the creation of Cole's iconic character Darcelle XV, and a star was born; and

Whereas in 1969, Walter Cole left his family to live with Neuhardt, but Cole always remained close to his wife and children; and

Whereas Walter Cole often said that becoming Darcelle saved him, giving him the courage to leave a life and career in which he felt stifled to instead begin living a happy, authentic life as the true person he felt himself to be; and

Whereas in 1974, Walter Cole's nightclub was renamed the Darcelle XV Showplace, and despite

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discrimination and other challenges, its reputation steadily grew over the years, and by the late 1980s the nightclub and its revue were woven into the fabric of Portland; and

Whereas a night at the Darcelle XV Showplace featured campy musical productions choreographed by Neuhardt, with Walter Cole appearing in an array of glamorous gowns he designed and sewed himself, singing numbers in his distinctive deep, gravelly voice; and

Whereas another signature feature of the act was Darcelle XV's warm and personal interactions with members of the audience and witty putdowns of occasional hecklers; and

Whereas long before drag became mainstream entertainment, Walter Cole was a mentor and role model to countless local and national drag performers, helping to launch many careers; and

Whereas the Darcelle XV Showplace is believed to be the oldest operating drag club west of the Mississippi River; and

Whereas tens of thousands of people have visited the Darcelle XV Showplace over the years and enjoyed the show: young, old, men, women, gay, lesbian, straight and transgender; and

Whereas Walter Cole was a fearless advocate for the LGBTQ+ community, relentlessly fighting discrimination and championing civil rights for all; and

Whereas Walter Cole was deeply committed to numerous charities, giving tirelessly of his time and energy to organizations such as the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court, Cascade AIDS Project, Our House of Portland, Esther's Pantry and Camp Starlight; and

Whereas for 30 years, Walter Cole's nightclub hosted free Christmas Eve banquets for anyone in need, some years serving more than 300 people; and

Whereas as Darcelle XV, Walter Cole became an unofficial ambassador of goodwill for Portland, appearing in numerous Portland Rose Festivals and Portland Pride Parades as well as at many other civic events and fundraisers; and

Whereas in 2003, Walter Cole received the Spirit of Portland Award in recognition of his charitable work related to HIV/AIDS, and in 2017 the Darcelle XV AIDS Memorial honoring Oregonians who have died from AIDS was unveiled at Lincoln Memorial Park in Portland; and

Whereas in 2019, Walter Cole was awarded an honorary knighthood by the Royal Rosarians in recognition of his decades of contributions to Portland civic life; and

Whereas later that year, the Oregon Historical Society held a exhibit titled "The Many Shades of Being Darcelle: 52 Years of Fashion," featuring some of the more than 1,500 costumes Walter Cole designed during his career; and

Whereas in 2020, both Walter Cole's Northeast Portland home and his Old Town nightclub were added to the National Register of Historic Places; and

Whereas Walter Cole passed away on March 23, 2023; and

Whereas Walter Cole was preceded in death by his life partner, Roxy Neuhardt, and he is survived by his wife, son, daughter, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren; and

Whereas Walter Cole was part of Portland's heart and soul, and he made a unique and lasting contribution to the city he called home for more than 90 years; now, therefore,

Be It Resolved by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Oregon:

That we, the members of the Eighty-second Legislative Assembly, recognize and honor the remarkable life of Walter Willard Cole Sr. (aka Darcelle XV), and we commend his lifetime of service and dedication to making the City of Portland and the State of Oregon better and more tolerant places for all of us; and be it further

Resolved, That a copy of this resolution shall be presented to the family of Walter Cole as an expression of our sympathy and condolences.

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