

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 8020 of the Second Extraordinary Session

By Clemmons

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of United States
Congressman John Robert Lewis.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly were greatly saddened to learn of the passing of United States Congressman John Robert Lewis; and

WHEREAS, Congressman John Lewis dedicated his life to protecting human rights, securing civil liberties, and building what he called "The Beloved Community" in America; and

WHEREAS, referred to as "one of the most courageous persons the Civil Rights Movement ever produced," Congressman Lewis evidenced dedication and commitment to the highest ethical standards and moral principles and earned the respect of his colleagues on both sides of the aisle in the United States Congress; and

WHEREAS, John Lewis, the son of sharecropper parents Eddie and Willie Mae Carter Lewis, was born on February 21, 1940, outside of Troy, Alabama, and was raised on his family's farm with nine siblings; and

WHEREAS, he attended segregated public schools in Pike County, Alabama, and, in 1957, became the first member of his family to complete high school; he was vexed by the unfairness of racial segregation and disappointed that the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* did not affect his and his classmates' experience in public school; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis was inspired to work toward the change he wanted to see by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons and the outcome of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and 1956; and

WHEREAS, he wanted to attend Troy State College, now Troy University, but the era of racial segregation prevented him from enrolling in the all-white institution; determined not to be

denied the postsecondary education to which he aspired, he enrolled in American Baptist Theological Seminary, now American Baptist College, in Nashville; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis applied through registered mail for admission to Troy State College while receiving his education in Nashville, challenging the school's segregation policy, but his application was never acknowledged; and

WHEREAS, he wrote to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who responded by sending him a round-trip bus ticket to Montgomery, Alabama, where he met with Dr. King, attorney Fred Gray, and Reverend David Abernathy; the meeting in Montgomery marked the beginning of Congressman Lewis's immersion and involvement in the modern Civil Rights Movement; and

WHEREAS, after one year at American Baptist Theological Seminary, he attended workshops on nonviolence directed by Reverend James Lawson, under the auspices of the National Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), which was founded by Reverend Kelly Miller Smith and others; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis joined other students in the first unsuccessful attempts by the NCLC to desegregate Nashville lunch counters in November and December 1959, and on February 13, 1960, he participated in Nashville's first full-scale sit-in at a downtown Walgreens lunch counter, where whites verbally tormented the students; and

WHEREAS, seven days later, Congressman Lewis formulated the rules of conduct that became the code of behavior for protest movements throughout the South; his participation in workshops at the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market further strengthened his belief in nonviolent direct action; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis was arrested during sit-ins and other nonviolent demonstrations, which upset his mother, but he remained firmly committed to the Civil Rights Movement, becoming a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), established in Raleigh, North Carolina, in April 1960; and

WHEREAS, following his graduation from American Baptist Theological Seminary, Congressman Lewis was one of the thirteen original Freedom Riders in 1961 to challenge the Jim Crow busing and travel laws that remained in effect throughout southern states; and

WHEREAS, after the Congress of Racial Equality discontinued its work on the Freedom Rides due to repeated violent attacks, Congressman Lewis and Diane Nash organized Nashville students to take over the effort and saw it through to its conclusion; and

WHEREAS, in 1963, he became the third chairman of the SNCC, and, as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, he assisted in planning the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; and

WHEREAS, the youngest speaker at the March on Washington, Congressman Lewis delivered a powerful speech and declared, "By the force of our demands, our determination, and our numbers, we shall splinter the segregated South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of God and democracy."; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis proclaimed, "We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political, and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about."; and

WHEREAS, he next coordinated SNCC efforts to organize voter registration drives and community action programs during the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis helped spearhead one of the most seminal moments of the Civil Rights Movement when he and Hosea Williams, on Sunday, March 7, 1965, led over 600 peaceful voting rights supporters from the Brown Chapel AME Church across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, en route to Montgomery, Alabama, fifty-four miles away; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis and Mr. Williams, as well as the other men, women, and children accompanying them, were violently attacked by Alabama state troopers and Dallas County sheriff's deputies on horseback who were wielding clubs, whips, rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire, and tear gas; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis, despite having his skull fractured, escaped across the bridge to Brown Chapel and, prior to seeking medical treatment at a local hospital, appeared before television cameras to call on President Lyndon Johnson to intervene in Alabama; and

WHEREAS, the disturbing events of what became known as "Bloody Sunday" were witnessed by more than fifty million Americans that evening when ABC News interrupted its

broadcast of *Judgment at Nuremburg* with video footage of the day's senseless cruelty, and countless others viewed photographs taken at the scene; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis was beaten unconscious four times and was arrested at least forty times during his civil rights career in Nashville and throughout the 1960s; he left SNCC in 1966 but continued to work for civil rights, serving as the associate director of the Field Foundation, a representative for the Southern Regional Council's voter registration programs, and later, as the director of the Voter Education Project, an organization that added almost four million minorities to voter rolls; and

WHEREAS, a member of Fisk University's Class of 1967, Congressman John Lewis was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to direct more than 250,000 volunteers of ACTION, the federal volunteer agency, in 1977; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis was elected to the Atlanta City Council in 1981, after focusing his campaign and efforts on ethical government and the preservation of neighborhoods; and

WHEREAS, he was first elected to represent Georgia's Fifth Congressional District in the United States House of Representatives in 1986 and became the second African American to represent Georgia in Congress since Reconstruction; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis continued to serve as a member of the United States House of Representatives until his death, acting as a Senior Chief Deputy Whip for the Majority, a senior member of the House Ways & Means Committee, and Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Oversight; and

WHEREAS, an accomplished author, he received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award for his biography, *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, which was written with Michael D'Orso and published in 1998. Congressman Lewis was also the subject of two other books: Ann Bausum's *Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement* and *John Lewis in the Lead* by Jim Haskins and Kathleen Benson, which features illustrations by famous Georgia artist Bennie Andrews; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis was the co-author of the National Book Award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling graphic novel memoir trilogy *MARCH*, written with Andrew Aydin and illustrated by Nate Powell; and

WHEREAS, *MARCH: Book One* received a 2014 American Library Association (ALA) Coretta Scott King Book Award Author Honor and an ALA Notable Children's Book designation, was named one of YALSA's 2014 Top Ten Great Graphic Novels for Teens, and became the first graphic novel ever to receive a Robert F. Kennedy Book Award; and

WHEREAS, *MARCH: Book Two* became a *New York Times* and *Washington Post* bestseller and was awarded the comic industry's highest honor, the Will Eisner Award, as well as two Harvey awards, among other honors; and

WHEREAS, *MARCH: Book Three* debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list, became the first comics work to win the National Book Award, and made history again by winning four ALA Youth Media Awards, including the Printz Award, the Sibert Medal, the Coretta Scott King Author Book Award, and the YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Award; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis was also deeply devoted to his family, and he always endeavored to remain true to family values of the highest order; and

WHEREAS, he enjoyed the loving companionship of his beloved wife, Lillian Miles Lewis, for forty-four years before her passing in 2012; he is survived by his son, John Miles; and

WHEREAS, "the conscience of the U.S. Congress," John Lewis was the last surviving member of the "Big Six Leaders" of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In 2018, he tweeted, "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."; and

WHEREAS, Congressman Lewis leaves behind an indelible legacy of integrity and probity in public life, compassion and loyalty in private life, and diligence and dedication in all his chosen endeavors; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting that we should remember the bountiful life of this exceptional public servant and human being; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of United States Congressman John Robert Lewis, reflecting fondly upon his impeccable character and his 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 Congressman Lewis.

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.